Capturing and assessing the experience of experiential learning: Understanding teaching and learning in a behaviourally challenging context

Report prepared for Lomandra School as part of the WSU Research Partnership Agreement with Lomandra School

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Acknowledgement
1. Introduction

Our project examines the application of an integrated curriculum through experiential learning in Lomandra School in NSW. A small and tight-knit special school\(^1\), Lomandra School caters to students from Stages 3 to 6 who experience emotional, social and behavioural difficulties (ESBD). Lomandra School has the highest enrolment rate among special schools in western and south-western Sydney. A team teaching approach applies to every class, each having up to ten students. All teaching teams, with a teacher and a School Learning Support Officer (SLSO), teach and facilitate learning across all curricular areas.

Lomandra School has been implementing the Outside Classroom Program since 2007. The study found that this alternative approach to special education innovatively designs and implements an integrated curriculum through experiential learning. The Outside Classroom Program embodies the interaction of the three emphases in the School Plan, namely students, teaching and learning, and community. As is described on the school website:

Lomandra’s Outside Classroom programs address the need for students to connect with their environment, their community, their society and each other...Students are given opportunities to make connections between different areas of learning through interdisciplinary activities.

This study is a research partnership between the School of Education of Western Sydney University and Lomandra School. It is also a major initiative of Lomandra School’s response to the requirement of the NSW DEC for evidence-based teaching and learning. This study uses a multiple case design which encompasses interviews with teachers, focus groups with students and lesson observations. It aims to generate a theory that explains the design, implementation, challenges and impact of an integrated curriculum through experiential learning in the context of special schools\(^2\). Specifically, this project addresses the following research questions:

1) What challenges need to be addressed when designing and implementing this approach? How can they be addressed?

2) What attitudes, values, skills and knowledge are critical to the design and implementation of an integrated curriculum through experiential learning?

3) How do educators (both teachers and SLSOs) and students at Lomandra perceive the impact of this approach on students learning and behaviours?

In response to these questions, this study will disseminate its findings by ways of scholarly publications (include this report), and an online case-based reasoning (CBR) library with a searchable engine. The CBR library uses a design that fosters causal reasoning and aims to help teachers and SLSOs from similar school settings to understand, design and implement the approach under investigation. Continuing efforts will be made to grow the CBR library for sustainability purposes.

\(^1\) In 2015, the school has 22 staff members and 72 students. There’s a mix of high school trained teachers (n=5), primary school trained teachers (n=3), and one K-12 trained (n=1). Each classroom has a qualified School Learning Support Officer (SLSO).

\(^2\) At this stage of our study, our focus is on schools for students with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties (ESBD). However, the finding from our study may be generalizable in other special schools and non-special school settings.
2. Research Methods and Process

A multiple case design (Jonassen, Strobel, & Lee, 2006) is used in this study by capturing the rich experiences of teaching teams’ design and implementation of the experiential learning programs in Lomandra School. The multiple case design is a qualitative research methodology guided by a set of systematic principles to develop an inductively derived grounded theory (Bogdan, 2007). Such an inductive approach provides our study with the flexibility for constant comparison of data for theory building. It is most applicable to our study as we explore questions about the nature of the integrated lessons carried out in the Lomandra School.

Data collection

Data was collected from three main sources for triangulation purposes and for the building of cases.

- Semi-structured interviews with 8 teaching teams (a teacher and a SLSO on each team) were carried out. All of them were directly involved in designing and implementing the Outside Classroom model at Lomandra School.
- Focus group discussions with 3-6 students from each class.
- In-school/lesson observations and field notes.

The interviews with teachers focused on how they designed and implemented the lesson, the resources they used, how they generated ideas and how they evaluated the lessons. The focus group discussions with students aimed to understand their learning experiences and outcomes in the Outside Classroom programs. Some principles of the Critical Incident method (Jonassen, Tessmer, & Hannum, 1999) were incorporated into the interviews and focus groups interviews to elicit information from the teachers. This method enables the collection of in-depth information on teachers’ reflection on how they deal with a particular incident that has significantly impacted them (See Appendix 1). Similarly, during the focus group interviews, the Critical Incident method was used to elicit students’ reflections on their cognitive processes (See Appendix 2). The questions for the interviews and focus groups were used to inform the construction of the case-based reasoning library.

Data analysis

Two cycles of analyses were conducted. In the initial cycle, the interview transcripts and field notes were indexed. Indexing is the process of assigning appropriate labels to the cases as they are entered into the case-based reasoning library. By doing so, these cases can be accessed, searched and retrieved. The structure of the index was derived based on existing research on experiential learning.

In the second cycle, the grounded theory approach was used to derive new theoretical perspectives based on the case-based reasoning indexes. The grounded theory approach helps generate a theory when existing theories do not address the research problem that the researcher plans to study (Creswell, 2005). This approach is relevant to this study as it helped to generate a theory to explain the influence of experiential learning and integrated curriculum on teaching and learning.

Specifically data analysis followed the guidelines suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding involved the breaking down, comparing and categorizing of data. Here specifying the characteristic of categories was crucial. Initially, general terms were used to describe segments of data. In axial coding, the researchers re-gathered the data and put them back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories. That necessarily enabled the researcher to build a “skeleton” of the findings, and make links between
different categories or subcategories. To do so, the researcher re-examined the previously analysed data and the research purpose and questions in order to narrow down the focus and select a core category. A theoretical model emerged to represent the relationships among the integrated curriculum, teachers’ teaching and students’ learning.

**Development of the ProbSolve Website**

One of the outcomes of this research project is the development of a case-based reasoning (CBR) library with a searchable engine. Case-based reasoning is a theory of human intelligence based on the recollection and description of prior experiences in the form of stories (Schank, 1996). Bruner (1990) argues that because the sharing of stories throughout our lives is so important, we must possess some kind of “narrative intelligence” that allows us to formulate, recall, and comprehend a story. Stories play a critical role in our cognitive system as they enable us to engage in remembering, explaining, understanding and decision making processes. Researchers in the field of case-based reasoning argue that stories can substitute for direct experience. Hence, when learning is supported with stories or cases, learners learn and gain experience more successfully, which leads to better retention of knowledge. Case-based reasoning can be applied in learning contexts through the collection, building, and indexing of case libraries. These stories are then accessed by learners while trying to solve a similar problem. In case-based reasoning, case libraries serve three functions: recalling old experiences, interpreting the new situation in terms of the old experience based on the lessons that we learned from the old experience, or adapting the old solution to meet the needs of the new situation (Kolodner, 1997). When the stories are indexed, they are more easily accessible and usable. In order to analyse the stories for indexing purposes, it is first of all necessary to capture stories that are relevant to the context.

The stories told by the teachers and students at Lomandra School helped to build a rich library of cases for case-based reasoning. An initial version of this library has been developed and it will be made available soon at [http://www.probsolve.com.au](http://www.probsolve.com.au) and registered users will be able to access it free of charge. Continuing efforts will be made to grow the CBR library for sustainability purposes. The creation of the CBR library aims at promoting the Outside Classroom model in similar schools contexts through encouraging causal reasoning among teachers and educational managers.

**3. Innovation of this study**

In NSW public schools, students who experience severe emotional, social and behavioural difficulties are subject to exclusion from mainstream schools, and consequently receive their education in separate learning environments which provide intensive support (NSW Government, n.d.). In these learning environments students receive small group attention and are expected to stay for 12 to 18 months before being re-integrated into a mainstream school or successfully enter the workforce. Some students stay longer at the discretion of the principal, family and mainstream schools.

These students are referred to special education environments like Lomandra School, primarily because they are disengaged from learning. Experiences of academic failure and grade retention lower student’s self-perceived competence and perseverance in academic tasks, leading to further emotional, social and behavioural issues (Quiroga, Janosz, Lyons, & Morin, 2012). These students are part of a vulnerable population, who is more likely to experience peer rejection, delinquency, poor learning adjustment, school dropout, unemployment, and lower earnings than youth without disabilities (Asarnow et al., 2005; Murray & Greenberg, 2006; Fiske & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2007, Rumberger & Lim, 2008).
To re-engage students with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties in learning, special schools are responsible for developing effective learning environments. Murray and Greenberg (2006, p. 220) call for the need for greater understanding of the social relationships and contexts of students with disabilities, as these ‘may act as risk or protective factors in the lives of these children’. Cullen and Monroe (2010) argue for pedagogies in special schools that support the development of more positive relationships between pupils and staff. However, the influence of social contexts for the development and learning of youth with special needs warrants further study (Sullivan et al., 2014).

A major focus of Lomandra School is to support these students’ complex needs in learning and other areas, in order to help them make successful transitions from school to work, community-life or further study at TAFE. The Outside Classroom Program has been developed to create robust and engaging learning experiences for students at Lomandra School. The Program is not simply a part of the school learning activities, but deeply embedded in the curriculum framework of Lomandra School. Here students are required to participate and learn through a variety of real-life outdoor activities, which offers opportunities to understand, apply and reinforce their academic learning, as well as improve their social and emotional intelligence.

Through this study it was found that the Outside Classroom Program has innovatively integrates outdoor experiential learning with an integrated curriculum. The integrated curriculum is a comprehensive framework that seeks to address learning from a systemic perspective. It aims to enhance personal and social integration through structuring curriculum content based on significant issues or problems that cut across different subject areas (Beane, 1997). The integrated curriculum is grounded in constructivist assumptions such as the active and meaningful construction of knowledge by the learners themselves; social interactions enhance learning, and the contextualization of learning. Studies have documented the positive outcomes of the integrated curriculum model (Feng, VanTassel-Baska, Queck, Bai, & O’Neill, 2005; VanTassel-Baska, Avery, Little, & Hughes, 2000). Wilson and Jan (2007) argue that the main benefit of an integrated curriculum is that significant content across and within learning areas is identified to develop and extend students’ understanding of the world around them.

Churchill et al. (2013) argue that the integrated curriculum is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary: knowledge and perspectives from multiple disciplines are brought together to explain a major topic, and interdisciplinary skills and knowledge are developed through addressing a common topic. Drake and Burns (2004) made a distinction between three approaches to integration in an integrated curriculum: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. Essentially the three approaches are different in the perceived degree of separation of disciplines or subject areas. It has been found that the greater the degree of integration is among subject areas, the more teachers are willing to explore new ideas (Applebee, Adler, & Flihan, 2007).

Drake and Burns (2004) argue for successful integration of accountability and relevance in teaching and learning through an integrated curriculum. The authors reviewed multiple cases where an integrated curriculum has been combined with standards-based curriculum, using creative teaching to achieve relevant and rigorous learning. They contend that often with increasing understanding of standards-based curriculum, teachers start to make connections between standards, thereby making interdisciplinary teaching an appealing alternative. Teachers who are familiar with standards-based curriculum can easily “chunk the standards together into meaningful clusters both within and across disciplines” (p. 2).

The implementation of integrated curriculum at Lomandra School is mainly through experiential learning. Experiential learning has it that real life experience drives learning, and knowledge is created based upon one’s experience. In this approach, learning contexts are real and purposeful,
motivational and practical (Jobling & Moni, 2004). Some propositions of experiential learning include: learning is a continuing process; learning can be facilitated by drawing on learners’ beliefs and prior knowledge to form new knowledge or refine existing knowledge structures; learning results from active engagement within the learner’s surrounding contexts.

Kolb (1984, p. 41) defines experiential learning as ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. Kolb, Boyatzis and Mainemelis (2001) argue the word ‘experiential’ differentiates experiential learning from both cognitive and behavioural learning theories. Cognitive learning emphasizes cognition over affect, and behavioural learning denies the role of subjective experience in the learning process. Experiential learning argues that learners develop knowledge through grasping and transforming experience. The theory consists of two dialectically related models of grasping experience – concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualisation (AC), and two dialectically related models of transforming experience – reflective observation (RO) and active experimentation (AE). Immediate, concrete experiences constitute the basis for observations and reflections, which are then assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which implications for new action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences.

While the integrated curriculum and experiential learning are both established theories, little research has illuminated the ways they can be combined to facilitate learning of students with special needs. This study has taken on this research focus, using a three-tier inquiry. These include attitudes, values, skills and knowledge that staff in special schools need to design and implement an integrated curriculum through experiential learning; perceived impacts of this approach, and challenges to this approach.

This study is innovative in three ways. First, little empirical evidence exists of the use of an integrated curriculum with an emphasis on experiential learning. Research has separately documented the success of integrated curricula and experiential learning. Second, most studies exploring the integrated curriculum approach was conducted in the context of gifted or medical education. Few studies examine the impact of the integrated curriculum model in the context of special education. Third, while there are studies focusing on understanding the existing social contexts of students with disabilities, or efforts to build positive relationships, mostly within schools, few have explored strategies and impact of using experiential learning to systematically rebuild positive social contexts to promote the social, emotional and academic learning of students with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties.

4. Integrated curriculum through experiential learning: Challenges and strategies

Research question 1: What are the challenges for the designing and implementing of an integrated curriculum through experiential learning in special schools? How are these challenges addressed or not at Lomandra School?

The major challenge for the installation of an integrated curriculum through experiential learning is the lack of a holistically supportive school culture. To systematically reconstruct a positive social context for students, Lomandra School underwent an organisation change for the development and implementation of the Outside Classroom model. Before 2007, Lomandra School endorsed a traditional approach to behaviour schools. As described by a keen promoter of the Outside Classroom model:
When I arrived at Lomandra, Lomandra was a different school. It was no outdoor activities, no kitchen ... no scissors unless they were signed out and signed in, no gardening, nothing. It was all just in a classroom...radios on like a high security prison. The doors were locked and the kids weren’t learning because basically they weren’t very successful in a mainstream school, in a classroom with other students...the kids were flying all over the radar and being very violent and very disruptive, a lot of swearing and running across roofs, climbing out of windows, not staying at school (Teacher).

Changes occurred step by step, from indoor to outdoor. At the beginning, indoor play-based and problem-solving pedagogies were used. Assembling plastic models was such an example. In this activity students follow instructions of how to construct a model, where they applied literacy and numeracy skills which they learnt in the morning sessions at school. The activity ‘seemed to capture their attention’ and was soon ‘adopted by other classes’. It was also used as an incentive activity if kids demonstrated a satisfactory level of commitment to their academic learning.

Creating a vegetable and fruit garden was the next step. The idea was not approved at first because the school leadership was ‘very worried about the kids getting their hands on garden tools’. Tools were signed in and out, and teachers took “the utmost care of developing these gardens”. One again the idea “worked really, really well” and students can also take the produce home”. This activity gave the staff confidence and motivation to develop more outdoor programs.

**Leadership support, whole-school communication and staff resilience**

The early promoters of the outdoor activities were more than happy to welcome a new school Principal who comes from an educational background that fully enforces the pedagogies and benefits of an outdoor education for students with special needs. Soon an outdoor education program came into being. The idea is to allow and encourage students who have achieved expected academic learning in the mornings to do outdoor activities in the afternoons. When the Outdoor Classroom Program was first introduced, there was resistance from some staff members and parents, who considered it risky and impractical for a behavioural school. Through the perseverance of key agents, or champions of the new model, including leaders, teachers and school learning support officers, the Outside Classroom Program went against the mainstream and got off the ground. The success of the first outdoor events helped to overcome fear and challenges. One example is the first overnight camp:

> We did the first overnight camp. Some members of staff were telling me how foolish I was and how it was going to be a failure. People panicked. But it was a great experience and these are with these kids that everyone thought were failures and shouldn’t be let out of school because they were too wild and it proved them incorrect; proved that the program does work. Then the outdoor program just started evolving from various things like mountain biking, rock climbing, swimming, kayaking......to the point we’re travel training (Teacher).

Some staff members quit the school as they ‘didn’t really want to do this type of program’. A team of new staff members was attracted by this innovative approach. With the commitment, resilience and innovative spirit of the staff members, different programs have been developed since then. An organisational change has been driven by these dedicated teachers, who the Principal described as ‘fantastic and special’:

> “there was a level of discomfort to start with...because we were asking staff to develop their confidence and comfort to take sometimes extremely naughty kids
out into the community. They take their behaviour and their mental health issues with them. And there have been times when we’ve needed physical interventions, restraints, or we’ve needed to involve the police or ambulance during our off-site activities” (Principal).

Gradually a cultural change at Lomandra School occurred. The program has evolved to include more diverse and high quality learning activities. As one teacher describes: “We don’t need to lock the door. I don’t carry a radio. The kids are sitting down. They’re working independently, or as a team. They’re working as well together and we’re getting some fantastic outcomes’. Another teacher also reflected on the positive change in the school environment:

When I started here year ago, we used to have three or four lockdowns a day because of violence, and people were scared, they wouldn’t come in the door. A school’s only as good as its management, and now this has changed everything. It’s just better.

It takes a special staff team to sustain the program. Over the years they have developed strategies to support each other and themselves. One approach is to put “a positive end to each day” through reflection on progress:

“We do know how difficult it can be from time to time. We know the nature of our students, we know why they’re here... but it really works that we reflect on the progress every student here has made. Some small steps, and some quite large steps, and that’s because of our understanding of the students’ needs”.

“Sometimes you create really cool programs. You think sweet this is going to be really fun, and then the day before the kids muck up, they smash a window, whatever. Then next minute they’re not allowed to go or we’re not allowed to leave site. So they’re up and down.”

Such reflections are central to staff meetings at Lomandra school. The communication approach at Lomandra is based on a whole staff basis. Almost everyday a staff meeting is held, where communication of issues, and progress take place, plans coordinated and supported, stories exchanged and listened to, burdens put down, and feelings relaxed. The sharing of achievement in the school meetings often renews the staff motivation: “maybe I had a bad day but I still done that and it might change the next day. I still have some wins” (Teacher). In addition, the tightknit and collegial nature of the Lomandra School means that staff members could have informal communication about students’ needs, expectations, and performance at any time. The resilience of staff is the engine that drives the Outdoor Classroom Program. As the Principal explained:

The staff are amazing. We’ve had days where huge numbers of windows have been broken, police involvement, kids cuffed and taken away, and we still sit in that staff room and say “in spite of that, this is what we achieved today.” That learning continues in this environment is just a feat in itself. (Principal)

**Student outcomes and parents support**

It took some time for the overall organisation change to happen. However, staff at Lomandra School agrees that this model has worked more effectively. In particular, they have found that not contributing most of their time and energy worrying about and ‘guarding’ these students means they can now shift their focus back to student learning. Indeed, students have been achieving in multiple aspects:
We tried different things before the outside classrooms came in, like having them move like in a normal high school from subject to subject in each classroom. It didn’t work with our kids. I have seen the transition in behaviours. Now we have more outside things than back then, and we’ve got more attendance. The kids are learning.

At the end of the day, students have achieved those mainstream school outcomes or life skill outcomes, and we can tick that off on the roser.

We’ve got some kids that have been here since fifth class, or younger, and I see them in the classroom now and they do learn, and they’re helping people with other work and answering questions.

They are helping other students, and they’ve got that empathy and that compassion.

(see sections 5 & 6 for more details about student outcomes.)

With an overall change in the cultural environment at Lomandra, and with students achieving learning outcomes, there has been a major shift in parents’ attitudes as well. For example, planning for the snow trip takes some time, and very importantly, staff members take account of parents’ anxiety about the safety issues during the trip.

“At the beginning of the year, we start with those short activities because the parents usually have some fears coming up a big trip with the snow camp, which the students have to be away for a week. So we’re checking out grounds, how the parents feel. We’re identifying worries, that’s how we start working with the parents to make sure the parents are [settled] for the big trip.” (teacher)

“I normally brief the parents and carers before we go skiing because the parents get anxious as well. Kids are going away for a week and for some of them it was the first time they’d been away for a week. So we briefed their parents and said to them look, try to support us in this. If the kids get upset or homesick and they phone you up and they want to leave, well it’s a six or seven hour journey and it’s not possible to do that.” (teacher)

“Over the years, parents’ attitudes have shifted to demonstrate a very positive and supportive mentality. “We’ve seen some remarkable turnarounds not only from the kids but from their parents and carers as well. We’ve had plenty of support from the students and the parents. I remember many years ago when I first started it was a very aggressive relationship from the parent’s side. Now it’s completely different. The kids are here at the school; the parents really want to get the kids here at the school.” (teacher)

One student said: “My mum thought it would be good for me to get exercise and join in with everyone.” One staff member said:

I rang one mother last year to say your son’s been selected to come to Lomandra. She said I don’t want to come here, I’ve heard these stories. She was apprehensive about coming in because of the stories she’d heard....She did come in, and her son’s now here thriving, and she loves it.

The staff members at Lomandra share common values and attitudes, which underpin the Outside Classroom Program. It can be argued that these values and attitudes have aggregated into a distinctive Lomandra philosophy, which will be explained in detail in the next section.
5. Integrated curriculum through experiential learning: Attitudes, values, knowledge and skills

Research question 2: What attitudes, values, knowledge and skills are critical to the design and implementation of an integrated curriculum through experiential learning in special schools?

This section presents findings about research question 2. Attitudes, values, knowledge and skills critical to the design and implementation of the approach at Lomandra School are conceptualised through the categories of educational philosophy (attitudes and values), and curricular development and pedagogical strategies (knowledge and skills).

5.1 The Lomandra philosophy

The Outside Classroom Program at Lomandra School is embedded in a distinctive educational philosophy constructed around attitudes and values about what the Lomandra School students should ‘be, do and know’. Put simply, at Lomandra School staff members believe that: Lomandra School students shall be productive citizens of society; they are entitled to live a meaningful life; they learn real-world skills and knowledge to achieve these goals. Table 1 summarises some key elements in this educational philosophy.

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<th>Table 1 The Lomandra Philosophy: Key concepts &amp; statements</th>
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<td>1. Why duplicate an approach that has failed them?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Our students need to contact with the real world from Day 1.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Our students have the desire and capabilities to learn and achieve.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Teachers, students and their peers are equal learners.</td>
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<td>5. Give them trust, respect and care, and expect them to return that.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. We support them, and they save themselves and choose what to do with their lives.</td>
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**Why duplicate an approach that has failed them?**

When students are channelled to Lomandra School from their mainstream schools, they are expected to make positive changes. Therefore the expectation is that Lomandra School could offer a different learning experience that would positively benefit these kids who have issues adapting to the mainstream schooling. Staff members believe that a successful approach would have to push through some fundamental changes:

I mean if they’re failing at high school sitting in a classroom, why try to replicate it? You know, why then say well we’re going to sit you in this classroom? What’s the difference apart from a smaller class size? We’ve got to think outside the box. We’ve got to think how can we educate them in a different manner, but still give them outcomes that’s going to make them successful when they leave school? So far it’s proven to work (Teacher).

All staff members we have interviewed expressed that they feel they are making a difference at Lomandra School because of what they have been able to do together with the students through the
Outside Classroom Program. One teacher said: “I started teaching here about three years ago. I was a little apprehensive… the more I taught here the more I realised I was making a difference here”.

Our students need to contact with the real world from Day 1.

Contact with the real world is an emphasised learning process and outcome for all students at Lomandra School. The school believes that all schools are temporary settings for students, and the real-world communities are where students spend the rest of their lives. Therefore, students need to have the social and emotional intelligence to be outside of the school. Lomandra School provides opportunities for such learning from Day 1 because “just like all learning, the younger that starts, the more success you’re likely to have with it”. One teacher of stage 5 (years 9 & 10) explained:

With our guys, I’ve been trying to get them ready for going out into the real world and providing them lots of opportunities like to practice their social skills whether it be in school having conversations with the executives, or off site writing up their resumes. They need to understand that we’re not always going to be here to support them and that they need to take responsibility. So sometimes they learn that the hard way and sometimes not so much the hard way. Whatever they do we just support them through it and continue.

Teachers accept and manage risks to take most students out on most occasions to give them the opportunities to develop social skills and become productive members of society. Despite the challenges, they are supportive of risk taking and have developed systems of risk management:

A lot of them you’d hesitate to take out, but these guys are never going to learn how to be out in society and act appropriately, the social cues, if we don’t take the risks. That is why we continue to do it, because we want them to be productive members of society. Some of our students require fairly skilled intervention of a physical nature. In spite of that, those kids are always considered when we leave the school. How do we include them? Can we manage the risk? We make plans; we talk to them; we do evaluations case by case, depending on where you are, or what the situation presents. There are times we have to leave them behind, or the SLSO might just stay with that student while the rest of the group goes ahead if they’re having trouble managing themselves. We have to make other arrangements for them, but in most cases we do our best to get them off site. That’s involved at different times, like on the ski tour, going up to the snow last year, we needed to enact a physical restraint in public. I can think of three occasions where students have had to be physically restrained in public. But it doesn’t stop us from taking them out. We just believe that this is the sort of stuff they need exposure to.

We’re looking at the kids in this setting as a whole. We know the kids’ surnames, we know their parents, we know the areas they live in, their friends... By looking at the student as a whole, you understand their social and emotional growth.

Our students have the desire and capabilities to learn and achieve.

A key guiding Principle at Lomandra School is that learning is the focus, not behaviour management. This is succinctly articulated by the Principal:

When new students come to the school, part of the enrolment and induction is to just say to them you’re not here because of your behaviour, you’re here because your behaviour has got in the way of your learning, so let’s focus on the learning. Whilst the students are off site, often at the school we push the high standards of learning. We’re not sitting here
waiting for them to be old enough to leave or naughty enough to be kicked out. No treading water here.

Teachers believe that their students have the desire and capabilities to create a meaningful life, and almost tirelessly, they believe in patience, resilience and being there for these students.

I had one student who tried to reintegrate all last year back to her home school. She was so incredible, a lovely young lady, friendly, polite, smart. She’d be like I want to go back to my home school. I want to get my HSC so I can go to uni. I’d say let’s set it up. So we’d set it up, and then she’d blow it. Again I’d say I don't mind if you want to stay here, but just tell me what you want, which way to go, how I can help you.

A presupposition of students’ desire and capabilities to learn underpins stratified educational objectives at Lomandra School. With younger students –Stage 3 and 4— the Lomandra teaching teams run their programs with the priority to reintegrate them into mainstream schools. With students who are not keen on going back to mainstream schools, Lomandra School focuses on exposing them to different pathways and equip them with social and emotional intelligence, real-life knowledge and skills, and work experience, which will enable them to live a meaningful life as a productive citizen.

**Teachers, students and their peers are equal learners.**

Staff members report that on many of these outdoor activities, they also have to learn from step 1. In addition, students find opportunities that bring out their diverse talents. This is typical of transdisciplinary learning where teachers are considered as “colearners and guides rather than instructors” (Drake & Burns, p.20). This levels the knowledge hierarchy which is present in indoor classrooms that often favour students with certain types of intelligences, and allows staff members to grow together with students, and their peers.

For the staff too, it’s back to being base line learners again. If it’s a new activity, none of us have got the skill in it, we start at that same point. When they get out on the snow or other things, that doesn’t exist, and they are on level playing grounds. So some of the kids who may not have had as a leader in the class may find they are good at something, and their status is elevated, so their confidence can be boosted.

Peer learning is one of the best resources and occurring during an outdoor activity. As there are many opportunities and tasks that would naturally require students to collaborate with each other and the staff members:

I did work on a wilderness program for students similar to the students here. This is Department of Ed. program. We would take them out for 12 days, bush walking, canoeing and sailing and the impact of that long term, sometimes it’s intangible, but sometimes the best source of information about the changes they’ve had on those students weren’t the staff or the school, but to talk to their peers about what change or what difference they’ve noticed. I do believe that if we get them out and we get them involves in their learning, their sense of empathy, learning how to cooperate with each other as well as all the other curriculum aspirations that can happen in a classroom, these things are value adding to their experience.
**Give them trust, respect and care, and expect them to return that.**

Trust is an important form of social intelligence (Yamagishi, 2001). In the tightknit community of Lomandra School, students and staff members learn to trust each other: “trust is so important to what we are doing here; they want to trust us as much as we want to trust them” (Teacher). Students have a good rapport with their teacher and their SLSO, as well as other staff at Lomandra School. A new staff member described how she gained confidence and trust in the students:

> When I was a praccy, I was in team three, Year 7 class, they were pretty crazy but not big. But the upstairs class, which is what I teach now ironically, I thought they had like violent, scary guys in there. I remember my supervisor saying to me, you've got to go upstairs to get over, no, no, no. I went upstairs, still a bit scared, but it’s not like that now. I teach that class now, I'm not scared of any of these boys. I have no worries that they would provide any violence towards me, none not even a little bit.

After overcoming initial apprehension, room teachers and SLSOs come to understand that their students need love and care.

> In my class I'm finding that these kids want desperately to be loved and to feel valued, but they've never, because of their behaviours and mental health issues, they've never been able to access that feeling. “I can’t make friends. I can’t interact with other people properly.” They don’t have those skills. They want desperately to be friends with each other, and they are always in each other’s’ space. They could be sitting on each other and yelling at each other to “you’re too close to me. Go away.” But they won’t move away because they want to be that close. They want to be friends.

As they get along with these students, they bring out more and more of the positive sides of the students:

> It’s easy for other people to see and think oh god not them again, not them again. But we have that unique experience to be able to see this lovely caring, genuine, incredible, amazing side to them. Any other adjective you can think that means good. Because we think the world of these guys.

Gradually students find a comfort zone with the staff members and become willing to show their trust, care, and respect to the staff members:

> I have a bad knee. One of the kids said Megan if you can't walk down there, don’t worry, you can stay at the top and we've got to go down a hill and back up again. He's just trying to find different ways to accommodate me.

> When we were walking through to scrub, B was like he'd always wanted to maintain contact. It wasn't me calling out to him, it was him calling out to me. So I knew where he was, because he knew that's what would need to happen, he knew not to run off and be silly.

With the Outside Classroom Program, students are developing their ability of trust in other social contexts.
We support them, and they save themselves and choose what to do with their lives.

Lomandra School has been considered a home by many past and current students.

Our kids are taught, without us explicitly saying it, that you can make mistakes, everyone makes mistakes, you’re allowed to make that mistake. We’re not going to turn you away. Lomandra is always here. You see it when the kids are starting to integrate back fulltime into the mainstream schools. I’ve got one that’s just done it, and the big worry is “once I’m here, will Lomandra still be there?” and they know that and they see. We’ve got senior ex-students who will occasionally come back to the school and work with the kids. One of the kids came back and worked in my class on a boxing program. So Lomandra doesn’t go anywhere. And it doesn’t matter if home is completely unstable, it doesn’t matter if mainstream is unstable, these students say Lomandra will be here for me.

The school leadership clarifies that the school’s responsibility is to support and help these kids, so that they can save themselves. Lomandra School is defined as a safe space for students to learn: “Most students like being here because of the approach that the staff takes with them. We’re flexible and we don’t give up. They make their mistakes and we help them get it right”. However, a professional and rational detachment is a strategic choice that the staff makes in order to better support the students in a consistent, effective and collaborative way.

The younger the students are, the more they are encouraged to transition back to mainstream schools. One Stage 3 teacher said: “I establish goals for my students to transfer successfully back to mainstream schools. I always talk about the opportunities they might have in the mainstream school which they might not have in behaviour settings”. Through the Outside Classroom Program the staff at Lomandra works hard to create more options for their students so they can choose what to do with their lives. The large variety of activities students engage with through the Outside Classroom Program means that they learn to understand their own interests, abilities, and their preferred post-Lomandra trajectories. Older students get opportunities to gain work experience and skills through the outreach program at Lomandra. Some students go to TAFE, with teachers supporting them in their study and applications, while others would go into trades and try out different options of work experiences, again with the accompaniment and supervision of Lomandra staff.
5.2 Transdisciplinary approach to an integrated curriculum

Drawing upon Drake and Burns (2004), we found that the integrated curriculum at Lomandra School has features of transdisciplinary learning. Important features include: real life context, student questions and concerns as starting places for inquiries, teachers as coplanners, colearners, and generalist/specialist; interdisciplinary skills and concepts applied in a real-life context.

A rigorous and well-organised intended curriculum “will be of little value if it is not effectively implemented in classrooms and schools” (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p.13). The Integrated curriculum through transdisciplinary learning at Lomandra School works more effectively than other approaches to align the intended, implemented and attained curricula. Almost all of the Outdoor Classroom projects engage student in a real-life context for the purpose of handling a real-life issue or problem. This often means that when they are on these projects, the disciplinary boundaries dissolve and the essential skills is to apply interdisciplinary skills and disciplinary knowledge into the successful completion of the real world activity at hand.

Teaching teams at Lomandra School are expected to understand subject matters deeply and flexibly in order to help students understand how various ideas and fields in the standards-based curriculum are related. At Lomandra School all teaching teams teach across all curriculum areas. This has contributed to their development of transdisciplinary projects in the Outside Classroom programs. One teacher gave an example: “The integrated way we teach, it’s easier, simpler to deliver the key learning areas. For example, this term we are doing leadership [as the topic] through the world wars, and through that we do literacy, numeracy, and Geography”. Teachers can make connections between the learning outcomes also because they are interdisciplinary learners themselves:

My methods at uni were History and Geography. But I am teaching the whole class here, interdisciplinary, all the key learning areas. Stage five, Year 10.

You learn the key areas fast. I didn’t do anything other than music before I came here. So you learn.

Educators experience deepening connections between curriculum areas as they become more experienced in this area (Drake and Burns, 2004). For example, a teacher tells stories about how she uses outdoor contexts to approach various topics to develop students’ interdisciplinary concepts such as literacy, numeracy and communication skills and then apply these to real-life contexts. She calls these ideas collectively as the Inspiration Program.

**Inspiration Program**

This is a flexible weekly program which ties the Outdoor Classroom activities to different areas of the curriculum, and individual students’ wellbeing.

**Visual literacy and communication skills**

For example, in the first week I was focused on creative visual arts. So I would take some oil pastels and I would go to the botanical gardens. Students would look at trees to sketch or draw, using the right colours. I measure the success if the kids were really engaged, if they made a good effort, if they really tried and communicated, discussed and shared their ideas to see how they would do it. Then I present the painting in the classroom.

**Literacy; Numeracy; History**
One of the following weeks I linked literacy with history. So we would visit Parramatta and all the historical places. When we’re back to the classroom we write an account and follow the structure of text. When the kids are out I would take a lot of photos to prompt their writing. So I arrange the photos with the kids in that place and build a memory account half way, and the last bit they have to finish themselves. It took a few weeks but I saw the program was very successful because the kids gained a lot from it in social development.

The next bit for this program will focus on forensic science. Then in a few weeks we are going to the city to visit Sydney Justice and Police Museum. Again it would involve a lot of mathematical skills, reading time tables and catching the train and planning, as well as linking our forensics unit about the police and stages of an investigation to the visit. It links as well to our history unit, particularly the gold rush. And that would be our conclusion, like a big trip to the city.

This teacher uses a backward design to design these learning activities. First a series of connected outcomes are identified in the curriculum; then acceptable evidence or deliverables from students are determined, for example, photographs, paintings. Then learning experiences are planned that require students to produce that evidence and achieve the desired outcomes. Using the backward design, strategies and assessments (formal and informal assessments) are well integrated into the teaching and learning processes. Teachers are able to analyse and reflect on their practice to assess the effects of their teaching and to refine or improve their instruction and guidance. They also help students relate what they learn to their everyday life (Darling-Hammond, 2008).

A list of about 30 Outside Classroom projects were mapped out based on our interviews with the staff members. The ideas for many of these activities came from teachers’ understanding of students’ interest: ‘we give a survey to our students, and see which students identify their zone of interest, and then we just team them up, you know, just based on the interest” (Teacher). This is a positive response to the Australian Curriculum where it is expected that students with disability “can access teaching and learning programs drawn from age-equivalent learning area content that is relevant to their individual learning needs” (Australian Curriculum, n.d.).

Another area where the Lomandra approach addresses the Australian Curriculum is its development of students’ general capabilities. Generally capabilities are integral to the Australian Curriculum, including in education for students with special needs. The general capabilities “encompass the knowledge, skills, behaviors and dispositions that, together with curriculum content in each learning area and the cross-curriculum priorities, will assist students to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century” (Australian Curriculum, n.d.). The seven general capabilities for regular students include: Literacy; Numeracy; Personal and social capability; Information and communication technology (ICT) capability; Critical and creative thinking; Ethical understanding; Intercultural understanding. The three general capabilities emphasized in the education of students with disabilities include Literacy, Numeracy and Personal and social capability.

The weekly learning at Lomandra School is separated into the indoor learning of disciplinary knowledge, and the outdoor learning of interdisciplinary skills. The two parts are welded into each other. The indoor learning covers content knowledge which students would need to fulfil their outdoor activities, and outdoor experiences reinforce students’ understanding of the connections between the cut and dried curricular knowledge. This approach fit in well with the expectation that

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3 Often because students know they have to behave well in order to join the outdoor activities, they are motivated to perform satisfactorily when learning indoor.
“the general capabilities ... support access to and progress through the learning areas” (Australian Curriculum, n.d.). Here are two examples:

Knowledge and skills from those outside activities, are then brought back into the classroom, and curriculum outcomes are addressed...It gives students purpose to engage back in the curriculum and achieve the outcome because when they are out there, they have to use the necessary skills like literacy, numeracy, writing, even just fill up the employment forms, or reading time tables to catch the train.

At the end of the year Karen got this plan of having a Christmas party, what would it involve, the organization, what things would cost, the balloons, food etc. There was one boy who did a whole basic spread sheet of what was involved, like items to buy, cost, where, how, when and who to get what...

It can be argued that the Lomandra approach addresses the tension in the implementation of the Australian curriculum, between discipline-based study and the development of general capabilities as essential 21st century skills.

“Increasingly, in a world where knowledge itself is constantly growing and evolving, students need to develop a set of knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions, or general capabilities that apply across subject-based content and equip them to be lifelong learners able to operate with confidence in a complex, information-rich, globalised world (ACARA 2012, cited in Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p.69).

Through the Outdoor Classroom Program, students obtain first-hand experience where they understand what the 21st century learning means, not through a curriculum neatly organised by subjects, but through developing general capabilities that integrates interdisciplinary knowledge and skills.
6. Integrated curriculum through experiential learning: Perceived benefits to students

Research question 3: How do teachers (and SLSOs) and students perceive the impact of an integrated curriculum through experiential learning on students learning and behaviours in special schools?

Transferrable concepts provide a good foundation for organising curriculum in integrated curriculum (Drake and Burns, 2004, p. 40). At Lomandra School these transferrable concepts have an explicit transdisciplinary dimension through students’ experiential learning, where first-hand experience leads to observation, experimentation, reflection and implications for new actions. The recurrent higher-level concepts are social and emotional intelligence, academic learning in real world contexts, physical and mental resilience, and work experience.

6.1 Social and emotional intelligence

Social and emotional intelligence describes skills and competences that enable individuals to effectively cope with daily demands in personal and social life (Bar-On, Tranel, Denburg, & Bechara, 2004). Social and emotional intelligence can be ‘multifaceted, domain and task specific, and reformulated in each significant life context’ (Cantor and Kihlstrom, p. 1). Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined emotional intelligence as ‘the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions’ (p. 189). The theory of emotional intelligence believes that individuals have or can develop the ability to think rationally about emotions, so as to solve problems and make wise decisions (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011). In the Mayer and Salovey (1997) model, emotional intelligence consists of four inter-related mental ‘branches’ along an ascendingly advanced continuum: perception of emotion, using emotion to facilitate thought, understanding of emotion, and management of emotion.

Often the outdoor activities are challenging for Lomandra students as “these will trigger anxiety and all sorts of reactions, but when push comes to shove, they did it, and they see that as an achievement, and they see that as part of building their confidence around the skills they’ll need when and if they commute if they get work.”

Lomandra students develop their social and emotional intelligence through interacting with peer students and work in a team. For example, during the annual skiing week, “two to four students work in a group to help each other, take care of each other and witness each other’s learning progress. It is built around safety, teamwork and helping your mate out” (teacher). Surfing is another example:

we intermingle or we have these boys later on mentoring younger kids that come along with us. So we’ve got the senior kids and the junior kids mixed in together, so they can be good role models for the junior kids and show them how to get onto the boat, how to do it safely. Again we do that water safety package on beach safety and swimming between the flags, before we go, always within the structure, teach them about rips et cetera. The seniors do help the little ones all the time and explain to them about the flags and everything down at the beach.

One student described his perception of team work during the Bushwalking project in the Blue Mountains: “we worked together. Last time I tried encouraging this chubby kid, but I got in trouble and he started crying because I kept telling him to hurry up. And everyone kept looking at me. But in the mountains you can walk past - like you can take the wrong track really easily and it’s happened before. He struggled, but he did it”.

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In the many outdoor activities, students at Lomandra School gained exposure to a variety of real-life situations where they learn to be a community member. Suburb profiling is a project where staff and students research, visit and explore local suburbs using ICT skills, and knowledge of geography:

When they were in different places, like Chinatown, Fairfield, Redfern, Wollongong, they had to learn to curb their language; they learn to wait until the green man before they could cross the road; they learn not to yell across to each other. So there was a list of social things like that. A lot of kids were turning up, it was on a Thursday last term. You could see how their social behaviours had improved.

When talking about races, sometimes all those stereotypes will come up. So we’re removing that attitude towards places like that. You want them to be informed citizens as well. It’s important that they be informed, and they don’t just say silly off-the-cuff things that they may have heard from their mates and then they go at community race type things. And they’re saying correct things. I think that’s important.

They’re not so scared now to get around the city. On purpose I might fall back a few steps or stop for a bit just to see where they’d go or if they’d stop and look around. At first they’d say oh no, like little ducks, where’s mom? Then more and more they were happy to venture off without us. Times when we did stop to get food in a food court or at the park, they have to sit on top of you. “It’s alright, it’s alright, you can sit over there.” At first when we were at the park eating sandwiches the kids were one meter away and the next week they were two, so they felt more comfortable out in the community.

With the development of social and emotional intelligence comes a shift of focus from behavioural management to interest-based learning:

“To watch the kids at the end of the skiing week it was cool. When they start, they can’t ski, and they hate each other because they’re with each other 24/7 and they’re having little tantys and whatever else. Then by day two or three, they’ve pulled their stuff together, and they’re ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, oh ‘do you want to come and play this game with me’. They’re shooting down the mountain, like the interest and resilience that they show.” (teacher)

The development of social and emotional intelligence also takes into account gender-based issues. There have been significantly more boys than girls at Lomandra School. Most projects were designed based on boys’ interest. However, this situation is now changing: “For the past two years I’ve had mostly boys, but now I have two girls among the 12”. Educators are coming up with activities to accommodate the needs of girls:

One particular week I had only one girl present. The SLSO and I are both females, and I also had a female prac student. So I decided to do a class just for her. We took a drive to the national park, and talked about things you need to know as a teenager girl. We kept talking about what to expect during your teenage and how to manage boys’ attention, etc. So it was a success. F asked a lot of questions, and afterwards, F said she became much calmer. You know we share advice and stories and tell her it’s okay it happens to everyone. Then she went back to the mainstream school. There was another girl in her class who was very anxious about girls’ business. F took her aside and calmed her down, and talked to her about what she had learned from that trip.
6.2 Academic learning in real-world contexts

Students achieved academic outcomes through learning in real-life contexts. The ‘Katoomba travelling training’ project best illustrates this. It is an Outside Classroom Project that develops students’ capabilities of going on day or weekend trips. A team of students work together, without the direct input of teachers, to research, plan and go on a train trip from Campbelltown to Katoomba, during which they also need to manage their own behaviours. Students develop their research skills in terms of planning and preparing for a real-world trip. They have to use the Internet to work out train times, costs, transfers and directions to destinations:

They work out through Google what time they’re going to be at Campbelltown and what time the train leaves to go to Blue Mountains. But it’s not a direct route is it? So you have to transfer. You’ve got to get off at Lidcombe station and get onto the other train from a different platform. So we give them like a little list of what they have to do and the right money so they’ve got to think about how to spend the money.

So what I normally do is I get on the train with them at Campbelltown and I sort of shadow them, but I don’t tell them how to get there. K (the teacher) will drive up there. So I shadow them until they get off at Lidcombe and then get on a new train. I get on that train with them and I go a little way up and then Keith picks me up at a station on the way up to Katoomba and then they’re on the train the rest of the way. So then we drive up and go to a cafe and we tell them we’re going to meet you at the Cafe. So they get off at the station, then they have to go down the main street and look for that café. They were very good. Then the next day we put them back on the train and they come back, then we just drive them when they get back at Campbelltown.

Students are required to finish this task by themselves. As a group they develop problem solving skills through integrating knowledge and skills to solve the real-life travel issue. In the process, they gain knowledge about the communities, and experience to navigate in these communities. Through suburb profiling for example, students develop and apply ICT skills and knowledge about geography:

So we’d pick a few sites to visit. So the guys would have to figure out how they were going to get there from the drop off point, using resources like GPS and Google. And when we come back they would have a little bit of a write up and we’d use our visuals and we’d have a mind map about what we liked about it, what we thought of it, what was different when we went there that we didn’t expect to see. So I think that was some prior knowledge that we used to prepare the kids, and what resources, like the buses, and ourselves, and the GPS prior to it. And obviously the geography part of that like map reading and writing. Their ICT skills and patience also improved.

Students also learn literacy by writing reports in the suburb profiling project:

They also need to Google about the places and provide a small report that I’d scaffold for them. Like for Government House, I’d provide the scaffold for the report and the kids would have to find the information and put it together. They had to use sentences starters with correct grammar and things like that throughout the report. When we first asked them to write a report they’d said what does that look like, what am I supposed to do, how do I structure it? Now there was such a breadth of abilities in the classes.
Assessment of learning is also linked with real-life tasks and tests. In the case of sailing for example, Captain Dave, the coach, “would assess them and give them questions, basically like port, starboard, various questions on navigation, how to read the navigational aids in the water and what they meant. It was the bonds, the wind and the horn. The ripples on the water, what the different ripples mean”. This assessment based on students’ first-hand experience in sailing prepared them for the online test to acquire the New South Wales boat license:

We did the New South Wales boat licence. It was an online test. Every week we would go into that and there was about 80 questions and the kids would answer the questions as if they were going for their boat licence, even though they weren’t old enough to do it. It was an online test and they got that competent that they’d get 100 per cent. It was quite a difficult test.

Some students who are currently straddling Lomandra School and their home schools revealed how their first-hand experience and knowledge gained through the Outdoor Classroom Program often help them to understand the abstract concepts when they go back to mainstream schools.

6.3 Physical and mental resilience

Improvement of fitness and mental resilience is another major outcome for students at Lomandra School. For example their resilience develops through learning to surf: “over the years we’ve had different characters in that class; that ability to get knocked down and get back up again really shows through.” The skiing trip is another activity that builds resilience:

The first thing that happens to the students is they fall over. It’s a foreign environment, and it happens to everyone, so the learning starts right there. You either pick yourself up or you throw in the towel, and very very few of them over the five years and the six trips that we’ve taken have thrown in the towel, have given up. They all picked themselves up and persist, and to watch them progress over the course of the week is fantastic.

According to the educators, students’ growth in physical and mental resilience has contributed to their learning attitudes and behaviour management. Educators report that there is a turnaround of behaviours from students: “often we think what a different student we’ve got now. So it works really well in favour of the kids” (teacher).

The Bushwalking project in the Blue Mountains is another resilience training project:

So when we get there, we park the bus near the Scenic railway. We walk down the stairs. It was a real big challenge and all we did was the stairs the first time once and everyone was swearing. However, the body changes in these boys over the period of time have been really significant. Their fitness levels have really increased. The parents have remarked on the change, physical change in them, which has been fantastic. I remember the first time, they were refusing to do it. They managed that one and it was a big achievement for them. Slowly we built it up. I want to challenge these kids, to put them at their extreme physical fitness. You’ve got to this point where you think you’ve got to give up and you’re crying. Your legs are sore, you’ve got no food, no water; that’s when the challenge begins. That’s when we say hey, now we’ve got up off our feet and we’ve got to walk.
I remember way back when I first introduced this it was raining. It was wet. I had a
student. He was covered in leeches. He sat down at the halfway point and he said I
can't go on and he was a big boy. He was bigger than me. I said well you know I
can't carry you and the only way up is walking up this track. I said we'll do it
together and we managed it, but he was covered in leeches and he was wet and he
was upset. He did it. Every single kid that we’ve had there, even though they’ve
found it challenging and wanted to throw in the towel and not do it, the only way is
to walk up those stairs. It's trying to give them that mental toughness, you know,
that ability to be resilient and to say hey, times are tough but I’m going to get over
it and just carry on and pick myself up from this point and move forward.

6.4 Work experience

The Outreach Program is part of the Outside Classroom Program that caters to Stage 6 students
(Sometimes Stage 5 students upon their request) who are interested in getting work experience and
preparing to future jobs through work placements.

On 26 November 2014, we met with B and his supervisor from Lomandra at
Afford Packaging, where the Year 9 student B would be doing his work
placement. AFFORD Packaging is a not-for-profit organisation and dedicated to
providing job opportunities to people with disabilities. When we arrived, a
group of people were sitting at the front gate having breakfast and friendly
conversations. B was already excited about starting to work. We walked through
a canteen to enter a spacious work site with multiple gates and loading zones
open to the courtyard. With the high ceiling and open gates, the place feels airy
and open. Very shortly it became active and busy, with nearly 50 people working
in teams on different packaging jobs. A few assembly lines were set up in the
middle of the room, at one of them B was compiling heaps of toothpastes and
get them tidy and ready for the assembly. The place was buzzing with activities.
People were friendly and confident. Many had been full-time employees at
AFFORD for many years. Working at AFFORD is a very important part of their life.
They take buses to come to work everyday, work on the packaging team, and
socialise over lunch. B looked calm and concentrating on his work. Standing at
the toothpaste assembly line, he would pile up a block of boxed toothpastes,
flatten the sides with his hands, and push the pile slowly onto the rolling
conveyor of the assembly. A and S, two staff members at Lomandra, were
supervising B. They were both happy with B’s performance this year, and were
happy for him to work one day a week unsupervised at AFFORD next year.

In other activities, job opportunities also come up as students demonstrate interests, abilities and
skills that attract owners of businesses. In the case of sailing:

We had a couple of kids who really enjoyed the sailing program. They were offered time down
on the boat working with Captain Dave. There are skills they picked up really quickly and they
wanted to help out on the boat. One of them was offered a career down there, but
unfortunately it’s too far, he said, for him to travel.
7. Conclusion

The Lomandra approach to special education have been well-received by students, parents and the staff members. The major challenge for the installation of an integrated curriculum through experiential learning is the lack of a holistically supportive school culture. The Lomandra School underwent an organisation change which has systematically reconstructed a positive social context that is sustained through leadership support, whole-school communication, staff resilience, student and parents support.

The Lomandra approach is embedded in a distinctive educational philosophy constructed around attitudes and values about what the Lomandra students should ‘be, do and know’. Put simply, at Lomandra staff members believe that: Lomandra students shall be productive citizens of society; they are entitled to live a meaningful life; they learn real-world skills and knowledge to achieve these goals.

The integrated curriculum at Lomandra School has features of transdisciplinary learning including: real life context, student questions and concerns as starting places for inquiries, teachers as coplanners, colearners, and generalist/specialist; interdisciplinary skills and concepts applied in a real-life context. Transferrable concepts provide a good foundation for organising curriculum in integrated curriculum at Lomandra School. These transferrable concepts have an explicit transdisciplinary dimension through students’ experiential learning, where first-hand experience leads to observation, experimentation, reflection and implications for new actions. The recurrent higher-level concepts are social and emotional intelligence, academic learning in real world contexts, physical and mental resilience, and work experience.

Given the positive outcomes of the integrated curriculum through experiential learning, it is recommended that Lomandra School continues to work in this direction and shares its good practices and success stories with other similar schools to benefit the greater community.

References


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Appendix 1 Teacher Interview Schedule

[Beginning of interview]
Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this project is to help us understand the Outside Classroom programs. We are particularly interested in how your design and implement these programs in and mostly beyond the classrooms. Your participation is completely voluntary. Your responses will be kept confidential. Would you like to ask any questions about this project or this interview? Ok, we will begin.

1. Individual and team work experience
- Would you please tell me a little bit about yourselves and your work experience?
  - How long have you been working as a teacher or teaching assistant?
  - When did you start working at Lomandra School? How do you like working here?
  - How long have you been working together as a team? What are the benefits of working here as a team?

2. Students’ post-school trajectories
- We understand that when students leave Lomandra School, some of them go back to mainstream schools, some go to TAFE, and others start working. How does Lomandra help students to pursue these pathways?

- We are particularly interested in the performance of students who had studied at Lomandra and returned to mainstream schools.
  - How have they been faring?
  - How have they benefitted from their Lomandra experience?
  - Have they had any difficulties adjusting to the mainstream schools?

3. The Outside Classroom Programs
- Have you been implementing any Outside Classroom programs?

4. Specific examples - The Outside Classroom Programs
- Can you tell us a specific example of the Outside Classroom Program which you have designed and implemented at the L school?
  - What did you do in this program?
  - How was the program designed and implemented? What areas of learning were connected? How are decisions about curricular content made?
  - What classes are involved in this project? What are the students like? What are their strengths and challenges?
  - What prior knowledge and skills were required of students in this program?
  - How did you prepare your students for the learning activities in this program?
  - What resources (learning materials, equipment, funding) were used in this program?
  - What were the challenges in designing and implementing this program? How were the challenges addressed?
  - What did students learn through this program? How did they learn in this process?
  - How were their performance or learning assessed in this program?
  - Have they had a chance to apply these knowledge or skills in other situations?
  - How did you document this program? How was it evaluated?

- Can you share another example? Do you mind if I use these examples to prompt students’ group discussion? Thank you very much for participating in this group discussion.
• How do the Outside Classroom programs benefit students in the L School?
• Do you think the following quote reflects your understanding of the Outside Classroom Programs at the L school? Why or why not?

“Lomandra’s Outside Classroom programs address the need for students to connect with their environment, their community, their society and each other... Students are given opportunities to make connections between different areas of learning through interdisciplinary activities...”
Appendix 2 Student Focus Group Schedule

[Beginning of focus group]
Thank you for participating in this group discussion. The purpose of this project is to help us understand your learning processes and outcomes at L School. We are particularly interested in your learning driven by your real life experience. We also want to talk about how you learn the same topics across different subjects. Your participation is completely voluntary. Your responses will be kept confidential. Would you like to ask any questions about this project or this group discussion? Ok, we will begin.

1. Which year are you in? How do you like L School?
2. Do you enjoy learning in L School? What do you particularly like about it?
3. Can you tell us a specific topic that you have enjoyed learning in L School?
   a. In which subject(s) did you learn this topic?
   b. What activities did you do in the subject(s) around this topic?
   c. How did you do the activities?
   d. What did you learn about this topic from doing these activities in these subjects?
   e. Have you had a chance to apply these knowledge or skills in other situations?

4. Here are a few learning activities you have done with your teachers. Can you talk about your learning experience in one of these activities?
   a. In which subject(s) did you learn this topic?
   b. What activities did you do in the subject(s) around this topic?
   c. How did you do the activities?
   d. What did you learn about this topic from doing these activities in these subjects?
   e. Have you had a chance to apply these knowledge or skills in other situations?
   f. Do you like this style of learning? Why or why not?

5. Did anything else come to you mind that I haven’t addressed or you’d like to bring up?

Thank you very much for participating in this group discussion.
Appendix 3 List of the Outside Classroom Program

1. Snow trip
2. TAGE trip
3. PNG trip
4. Southcoast trekking
5. Canberra trip
6. Golf
7. Fishing
8. Katoomba bushwalking
9. Geocaching
10. Camps
11. Sports (swimming, etc)
12. Surf school
13. Sailing program
14. Sydney historical sites
15. Gym
16. Cycling
17. Sydney museums
18. Rewards Programs (Laser zone movies)
19. Oz Harvest (working with corporations)
20. Football game with another behaviour school
21. Gala Day (with other mainstream schools)
22. Variety show
23. Orientarian Competition (NSW-wide)
24. Melbourne trip (Taking Flights)
25. Travel training
26. Bakery visits
27. ICT game development (Maquarie Uni).
Appendix 4 Other pedagogical strategies

Team teaching and modelling

At Lomandra staff members work in teams. Every team has their own classroom which they have every day. Every class has a team of one teacher and one school learning support officer. Team teaching is highly appreciated here. As the Principal put it: “the best resource this school has is the two adults working the room. The teacher delivers the lesson, programing; the SLSO supports the planning, the learning, and to support behaviour management”. In addition, the collaboration between teachers and SLSOs as respectful partners provides good modelling for students:

“the two adults in the room can model appropriate behaviour, can model responsibilities, can model how in the real world how two people interact positively to get to a certain outcome because a lot of our students, their perception of relationships may be warped or dysfunctional and so to actually see it working in a positive way, in an appropriate way, it resonates with all our kids” (Principal).

Peer management

It is often the case that different teams would combine to do activities that suits the needs of both classes. The classes are flexible if need be: “the kids are aware of that and it works well. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for them, and they just continue to work on for me as they would with their own class teacher”. Students who work across stages benefit from peer mentoring:

I’m using it as a leadership idea, so some of the kids who are starting to show leadership skills, they’ve got to take, outside in the community, to take the younger kids under their wing and working with them in a leadership role, so it’s kind of a mutual benefit.

In two weeks’ time we’re going to the Sydney excursion. I’m taking my team and Team three, I have a bunch of small kids, but I will also work with the student leaders from the senior class to manage behaviours. Sometimes a student would respond really well to older students, but they just would not respond to adults like that. So it works really well.

Another benefit of cross-team collaboration is for students to build relationships with other teachers, so that “you’re not in your closed little bubble of your own team”. One teacher said that: “I like that the kids trust us, but they’ve got to learn to trust others. We’re not always going to be here”.

Risk management

To give parents confidence in the outdoor activities, each class starts with short activities and gradually build up to day and week-long trips: “we’re checking out grounds, how the parents feel. We’re identifying worries to make sure the parents are settled for the big trip”.

There’s a teacher in the front driving of course, not a kid. There's one sitting right in the middle and there's one sitting in the back of the bus. We used to go out because we earned it. We earned to go out because we’ve been good and we’ve earned to go out for the week for a day and have some fun with our class because we’ve earned it the week before. We have to complete all our work. No
disrespecting the teachers and basically that’s it. We are not allowed to go out unless there’s a permission note signed or phone call home.

Risk management in the Outside Classroom Program aims at making sure students fulfil the learning outcomes with sufficient scaffolding and safety support. Every outing is planned to the last detail, and risk management plans are individualised. From the school leadership to teachers, SLSOs, admin staff, and students, everybody learn to calculate and manage risks. The school leadership takes priority to ‘support the staff...in that they can take calculated risks in working with the students and managing the students in that respect’ (Assistant Principal).
Appendix 5 Students say this about Lomandra School

Question: Do you like Lomandra School? Why?

Answers:

- It is so cool.
- You meet new friends.
- You get to do a lot of things, and you don’t have to pay.
- My mums likes it, and said it is good for your to go outside.
- Instead of staying inside all the time, we get to play outside, and do a lot of stuff.
- My mom found this school. I came here for three weeks, and she likes it.
- It is a very good school. The teachers are very nice, and the deputy principal and the principal are very nice. You go everywhere.
- It is fine and free. We don’t have many rules, and we can do a lot of things.
- You should come.
- I like going outside because it keeps me fit.
- Yeah, because it’s something new.
- Because they help me a lot.
- Lamayo (a mainstream school) is better. Because I have more friends there.
- You get to go surfing. You get to go abseiling.
- You get to do things you could never do and that keep us contained.
- Because they always support us in everything that everyone has ever done even if it includes...
- They’re there to help you.
- They buy us tree frogs and they give us lollies, they let us watch movies.
- They help us.
- You get to go surfing, abseiling.
- We get to go to the snow for a week.
- Coming here is really to contain anger management and make everyone feel happy, like everyone - together.
- This school is about lots of things.
- It’s a good place to come here because they give you a goal to go back to your home school. There’s more opportunities there for them, isn’t there, in life.
- I really enjoy it. It’s better than all the other schools.
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