
ESTABLISHING A HIGH-QUALITY JAPANESE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to share successful practices by Japanese teachers and college leadership at Mernda Central P-12 College when establishing a new language program. The vision of the College from the outset was to deliver the language not just to the classes, but rather to the community as a whole, including students, staff, and parents. Japanese was selected as the language for students to learn at Mernda Central P-12 College as it aligned with the college values and expectations. The main goal over the first year was to build the capacity of all staff to support growth in students' cultural awareness. It is hoped that by sharing examples of successful practice, ideas can be replicated to engage communities in language education. Furthermore, this article will explore methods in developing a rich and vibrant program to expand Japanese learning beyond the language classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to share successful practices engaged in by Japanese teachers and college leadership at Mernda Central P-12 College when establishing a new language program. The vision at the college from the outset was to deliver the language not just to the classes but also to the school community more broadly, including students, staff and parents. Japanese was selected as the language for students to learn at Mernda Central P-12 College as Japanese notions of respect and hard work align closely with college expectations. The main goal over the first year of the program was to build the capacity of all staff to support growth in students' cultural awareness. It is hoped that by sharing examples of successful practice, ideas can be replicated to engage communities in language education. This article will also explore methods in developing a rich and vibrant program to expand Japanese learning beyond the language classroom.

BACKGROUND

Mernda Central P-12 College is a co-educational government school that opened its doors in 2017, with enrolments initially taken from Foundation to Year 7. By 2022, the college will have enrolments from Foundation to Year 12. Mernda Central P-12 College is part of the Public Private Partnership program (Department of Education and Training 2016)¹, and at the end of 2018 had a student population of approximately 770. The College is located in a growth corridor in the north of Melbourne, and enrolment numbers are expected to exceed 1,000 students in 2019. While the school has a very multicultural student population, only two students speak Japanese at home.

COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS IN LINE WITH THE SCHOOL WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS PROGRAM

By aligning the language program with school expectations, the fledgling Japanese department was able to make strong connections with the community. Mernda Central P-12 College is one of a number of Victorian government schools engaged in the School Wide Positive Behaviours program. The purpose of this program is to have students strive towards the four college expectations, those being 'Aim High', 'Behave Safely', 'Show Respect' and 'Value Our Community'. Students at the college are explicitly taught these four expectations across all subject areas, as well as during an hour each week set aside for student wellness. To acknowledge students who exemplify these behaviours, a token-based reward system is well established. Students observed modelling any of the expectations can receive a token from any member of staff, which can then be traded in for a range of rewards, opportunities or experiences. At the request of the language teachers, a Japanese version of these was created. Initially, these Japanese tokens were only awarded during Japanese classes, but due to their popularity were soon being used by all staff across the college.

HIGH IMPACT TEACHING STRATEGIES AND ADAPTABLE SPACES

The Victorian Department of Education released a series of High Impact Teaching Strategies (Department of Education and Training 2017). Mernda Central P-12 College is committed to the application of these across all areas of curriculum, and unit planners are structured in such a way that they can be explicitly used across courses. For languages, the strategy that was best employed across 2018 was differentiation. Differentiation took place through effectively using co-teaching options made accessible through the use of adaptable learning spaces. The Japanese classrooms were separated by a partially retractable glass door, and the classes also had access to numerous breakaway areas. As both Japanese teachers were always teaching the same year level in these adjoining classes, there were always opportunities to adjust groupings and instruction to suit student needs.

1 As part of the Public Private Partnership, the grounds and buildings of Mernda Central P-12 College are owned and maintained by private companies. However, all aspects of curriculum, pedagogy and instruction are managed and delivered by the Department of Education. Through this partnership, the school is able to invest greater time into educational priorities, while maintenance of grounds and facilities remains the responsibility of private partners.

PROGRAM

The Japanese program commenced at the end of 2017 following a collaborative process involving the whole college community. During the collaboration, a survey took place to canvas interest in a variety of languages, with Japanese selected by a majority of respondents. Japanese is not a community language; however, the values of 'Respect' and 'Value Our Community' aligned well with cultural values inherent in Japanese society. Furthermore, a high level of interest in Japanese culture, particularly *anime* and *manga* subcultures, validated this selection. The college then went about employing an experienced Japanese teacher to lead the program, and hired a second Japanese teacher to ensure all classes would be staffed.

For the first six months of 2018, students in Year 7 and Year 8 undertook Japanese language studies. As this was the first year of Japanese for both levels, a similar curriculum was used for each. However, as the year progressed, Year 8 was adjusted according to students' individual needs and interests. This adjusted curriculum supported their pathway to Year 9 language study. Lessons were developed according to the college instructional model, which involved clear intentions for learning, a mini lesson, independent or group work and reflection.

One of the most important aspects to establishing the program was designing a timetable to support instructional needs. This timetable allowed classes to be blocked in pairs, utilising the adaptable learning spaces and creating co-teaching opportunities. Curriculum was mapped to allow maximum collaboration, and the students were given the ability to work at their own pace through content. Many online programs such as Education Perfect, Quizlet, Learning Fields, Kahoot and Socrative were used to enable students to access varied and personalised learning tasks.

During the first semester, the Japanese teachers were provided additional time to informally introduce Japanese into primary classes. This encouraged the teachers to have conversations with primary teachers and offer support with inquiry units or one-off Japanese classes. There was a great uptake with these offers, with two of the learning communities inviting the Japanese staff to give presentations and conduct question-and-answer sessions. The result of this was that many of the Year 5 and 6 students completed a research task on an aspect of Japanese culture. Following this success, the college took the next step and chose to introduce formal Japanese language study from Semester 2 for all students in Years 5 and 6.

Other successful examples of collaboration beyond the Japanese department were evident across a range of subject areas. Art teachers adjusted their curriculum to include a key focus on Japanese drawing techniques, and the Food Technology class began making sushi as part of their course. Japanese parasols were purchased by the Drama department, and History classes incorporated more units related to Japan. Furthermore, the Japanese department offered lunchtime origami classes to students of all year levels, seeing an opportunity to engage with the primary students who were yet to formally study the language.

Over the first few months of the program, one of the key non-teaching objectives of the language program was to explore the possibility of a sister school in Japan. As both language teachers had years of experience in strong language faculties, connections were explored and a number of options were tabled. Once a school had been identified, teachers at both schools immediately set to working on a memorandum of understanding. The aim was for the school in Japan, Shōyōkan Junior High, to visit for one day during their annual trip to Australia, at which time the memorandum would be formally signed. This visit created the best opportunity to date to share the language and culture with the entire college community. An assembly was held where the visiting students showcased Japanese culture and customs, and this was shared with the college community via social media and other media. Students were engaged in a range of cross-cultural activities for the day, with Mernda Central P-12 College students and teachers teaching their guests how to paint a boomerang, kick an AFL football, cook Anzac biscuits and solve a wooden puzzle. The level of collective efficacy on the day was the most telling, with most of the activities run by non-language teaching staff keen to be part of the experience.

One of the greatest successes in the first year outside of the languages classroom was the advent of Japanese clubs at the college. At Mernda Central P-12 College, there is a mandatory clubs program on Wednesday afternoons in which all staff are required to participate. The timing, purpose and nature of the clubs are at the discretion of the staff, but from the language teachers' point of view this was seen as an opportunity to further embed the subject into the fabric of the college. Initially, a lunchtime language and culture club was established, and this group of students became a driving force for a range of other activities that followed. A Japanese cooking club ran during Term 2, the result of a partnership with a Food

Technology teacher who was keen to learn more about Japanese food and share this journey with students. The language and culture club was heavily involved in supporting the sister school visit, and also participated in an excursion to Mount Waverley Secondary College to observe their languages day. The purpose of this was to gather ideas to run a similar event at Mernda Central P-12 College. To reciprocate for the visit, a cooking challenge was held in Term 4 where students made *okonomiyaki* pancakes.

Over the course of the year, students were able to participate in a range of events and competitions. Many of these were organised and run by the Japanese Language Teachers Association of Victoria (JLTAV), a constant source of support to the language department. These included the annual conference publication cover design competition, calligraphy competition and the Junior Speech Contest. Participation in these events gave students the opportunity to compare their language skills with others across the state and see the progress that they were already making.

The college was also pleased to welcome two language assistants during the year, firstly from the Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (TJFL) program in Term 1, then from the Overseas Teaching Practicum Program (OTPP) in Term 3. These two visitors provided students with authentic opportunities to practise their language skills and learn more about Japanese youth culture.

BENEFITS AND PITFALLS

BENEFITS

The greatest benefit of establishing the Japanese program lay in staff and student engagement in studies of Japanese language and culture. This engagement opened up further avenues to explore the subject, bringing in a range of co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities. Furthermore, seeing the joy the students had in using a different language, non-language teachers began using the target language during their classes. Teachers were also happy to volunteer their time to work with visiting students from the sister school, and principals began greeting students in Japanese during college assemblies.

Having the Japanese tokens in circulation allowed Japanese to be ever-present across the campus. Furthermore, the support and engagement that began with the sister school visit and primary inquiry projects led to non-language teachers using target language in their lessons and allowing students time to sing songs taught during Japanese sessions. Additionally, the exemplary behaviour of Japanese visitors to the college, both students and assistants, led to increasingly positive views of the subject within the school community.

Successful differentiation in the Year 8 classroom meant that a number of students in that cohort had met or exceeded the Victorian Curriculum level expected at that time. This meant that running Year 9 language was not only a possibility, but a necessity. In addition to this, trials of a more immersive approach in classes were well received. This led to conversations about a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) course that was added to the Year 9 Handbook at the end of 2018.

PITFALLS

One of the few challenges in establishing this program was the pressure to cover the curriculum faster so that Year 8 students were sufficiently prepared for their further studies. It was possible to ameliorate this concern by differentiating the curriculum and extending those who demonstrated interest in more complex language. However, making up two years of study in one is not always ideal for depth of vocabulary acquisition. To ensure this does not have a lasting effect, time will need to be spent reviewing vocabulary with the affected cohort so they are prepared for further studies.

CONCLUSION

Through the engagement of the whole school community, Mernda Central P-12 College established an effective Japanese program, delivering meaningful curricular and co-curricular outcomes to students. The strong alignment of Japanese beliefs around respect and hard work with values the College strives for, along with positive attitudes and teamwork, allowed this to happen. Subsequently, by making connections with a sister school, developing partnerships with another school in Victoria, and utilising the support of teaching associations and their competitions and programs, a rich and vibrant Japanese program was born at Mernda Central P-12 College.

POSTSCRIPT

The Japanese department at Mernda Central P-12 College has continued to grow and flourish since this article was written. As of 2021, there are five Japanese teachers and a language assistant employed at the college, and Japanese is taught from Prep to Year 11, our highest level. With 75 students having elected to study the language in Year 9, the subject continues to go from strength to strength. As buildings have been added to the college, they are assigned a Japanese name to further embed the Japanese language and culture. Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classes ran in 2019, connecting Japanese and history through a study of Edo Japan. Our CLIL program continues to evolve each year, with connections now being made with Music and the Performing Arts to establish a *taiko* program. That year, 14 students also took the opportunity to participate in our inaugural Japan study tour.

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 in 2020, the college was still able to conduct virtual lessons with sister school Shōyōkan Junior High School. These classes further solidified the connection between the two schools and the sharing of language and culture. The College has grown to just under 1,500 students in 2021 and will have its first Year 12 cohort graduate at the end of 2022. Teachers from the college have also assisted in the establishment of Japanese programs at a neighbouring school. It is an enormous source of pride that the network as a whole is benefitting from the program's continual growth. The college aspires to be known for its rich and vibrant Japanese program aimed to inspire student learning in and beyond the language classroom.

REFERENCES

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