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# LEADING LANGUAGES AT MERNDA CENTRAL COLLEGE

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ANTHONY OLDMEADOW  
NICHOLAS CREED  
STEVEN MIYAZAWA  
THOMAS ARMSTRONG  
Mernda Central College

## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview for Japanese language teachers and school leaders seeking motivation and inspiration for developing, expanding and reshaping existing Japanese programs. It incorporates strategies to engage whole school communities, including staff, students and parents, in enhancing and enriching a language program to support student learning and engagement. These strategies will be explored along with examples of successful activities and initiatives, in addition to systems and structures established to attain success. This paper will also address the steps taken at vision, structure, system and curriculum levels to develop and expand the nascent language department from the ground up in a Prep to Year 12 setting at Mernda Central College. This paper also explores some of the resulting successes from these initiatives.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to share the strategic leadership, curriculum leadership and structural practices established at Mernda Central College, where a successful Japanese language program has been developed, expanded, and embedded into the fabric of the school at all levels since its establishment in 2017. This article explores how the various levels of leadership at the College have enabled students to achieve success in their language learning, and how this leadership has seen the language program expand its impact both within the College and across schools in the local area. It is hoped that Japanese teachers and school leaders will be able to take inspiration from our success both to implement some of the ideas and practices discussed here into their own settings and to use it to further advocate for language learning.

## BACKGROUND

### COLLEGE STRUCTURE

At Mernda Central College the student is at the centre of every decision that is made. Teachers actively work to teach each student at their point of need, with the High Impact Teaching Strategies (Department of Education and Training 2020) underpinning effective teacher practice. Our innovative, rich and rigorous curriculum is delivered in a positive, stimulating and challenging learning environment where every student can experience success and develop a life-long love of learning. Our students are encouraged to become deep-thinking, informed, resilient and self-directed learners who are able to be the best they can be and contribute actively to their community.

Mernda Central College's structure is organised around four stages of learning, referred to as sub-schools. The Junior School caters for the learning and developmental needs of students in Prep to Year 4 and is based on laying the foundations for learning. The Middle School caters for students in Years 5 to 7. This sub-school focuses on the needs of the adolescent and aims to foster a learning environment that motivates students to engage and connect to school life through a breadth of curriculum offerings, as well as supporting upper primary students as they transition into secondary school. The Aspire sub-school at Years 8 and 9 actively engages students in new experiences that encourage them to investigate, make discoveries and start to explore future career pathways. The Senior School, Years 10 to 12, aims to use formal studies in the classroom to prepare students for the wider context of everyday life and the world students are navigating towards.

### COLLEGE HISTORY

Mernda Central College is a coeducational Prep to Year 12 (P-12) school that opened its doors in 2017. The school is situated to the north of Melbourne, Victoria, and follows the Victorian Curriculum from Foundation (Prep) through to Year 10. Students then typically undertake the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) during Years 11 and 12.

Initially the school opened to students from Foundation to Year 7, and by the following year had introduced Japanese as a subject for all Year 7 and Year 8 students. From 2019 students in primary classes have learnt Japanese, and from the very first class the College maintains a focus on ensuring all students who study Japanese can experience success.

Since its inception, the Japanese program has flourished and expanded. By the end of 2022 there were seven Japanese teachers and a language assistant employed at the College, and Japanese is taught from prep to Year 12. With nearly half of all students electing to take the language stream in Year 9, the Japanese program continues to grow.

The College has grown to over 1,600 students and had its first Year 12 cohort graduate at the end of 2022. Japanese teachers from the College have also assisted in the establishment of Japanese programs at a neighbouring primary school. It is an enormous source of pride that the Whittlesea network is benefitting from the program's continual growth at Mernda Central College.

As buildings have been added to the College, they have been assigned a Japanese name to further embed Japanese language and culture into the school. Plans are also in place for the construction of a Japanese Garden for our students. 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 for students from Years 4 to Year 6. In 2019, 14 students also took the opportunity to participate in our inaugural Japan study tour to our sister school in Japan.

The College aspires to be known for its rich and vibrant Japanese program aimed at inspiring student learning in, and beyond, the language classroom. In 2022 the College established a Japanese Enhancement Program, an opt-in program for Year 7 students, which aims to enhance these students' language learning experiences. It does this by providing opportunities to participate in Japanese cooking sessions and calligraphy classes, and through the provision of an enhanced and enriched curriculum designed to further challenge and motivate these students.

## PROGRAM

The Japanese Program at Mernda Central College commenced with a vision that all students at the College have access to a high-quality, well-resourced and innovative Japanese program, that aligns with the College mantra "Learn, Grow, Succeed." The specific aims for the program are:

- To develop students as global citizens with cultural empathy;
- To lead a team of committed and dedicated staff with high quality teaching practice at the centre of what we do;
- To build a program that the school is known for, and that provides students with rich and authentic language learning opportunities;
- To support the network and wider Japanese teaching community through sharing of resources and practice;

To enable the College to achieve these goals, there needed to be a significant time commitment to Japanese across the whole college. In the Junior School (P-4), students have one hour per week of Japanese for the whole academic year. This provides our students with sufficient time to engage with the content and build on skills each year, with a view to continuing Japanese through to VCE should they choose. In Middle School (5-7), students move to two hours per week, to facilitate greater development of their core language skills. They engage in a range of activities, with teacher generated "passports" at the centre of their learning, with activities targeted to students' points of need. For example, a student struggling with script will still be able to access the phrase or structure being taught through scaffolded instructional templates and adjusted language input.

Our Year 8 students continue to learn Japanese as part of the core curriculum for two hours per week. However, Year 9 students may choose a year-long "Japanese Language" elective for two hours per week, or a semester-length "Japanese Culture" elective—also two hours per week. The language elective is aimed at students intending to continue Japanese studies into senior school and focuses heavily on the usage and comprehension of the Japanese language. Culture is both implicitly and explicitly taught alongside this focus. The culture elective blends use of Japanese with a project-based approach that investigates specific themes and topics of Japanese culture. At the Senior School, students can choose Japanese as an elective at Year 10, 11 and 12, and should they do so, they receive four hours per week of instruction throughout the year. The success of these programs is evident though data below:

- 50% of students in Year 9 choose the language stream for the whole year;
- In 2022 and 2023 there were two Year 10 Japanese classes, with student numbers over 35 in 2023;
- Regular viable classes of VCE Japanese, with 15–20 students selecting Japanese each year it has been on offer;
- CLIL programs are well supported with both iterations attracting enrolments of around 20 students.

With such a large number of staff and Japanese language learners, it became essential to ensure each area of the College has effective curriculum leadership, and a presence at relevant meetings at each sub-school (Junior, Middle, Aspire or Senior) to advocate for language learning. At these meetings, Japanese curriculum leaders can explore cross-curricular opportunities, such as letter writing in English classes and Japanese-themed projects in Design and Technology classes, with leaders of other curriculum areas.

Accordingly, curriculum leaders have been appointed for both Middle School and Senior School Japanese, with a coordinator appointed to the Aspire sub-school (8–9) in 2023. These leaders are responsible for ensuring the planning, documentation and delivery of an innovative curriculum that meets students at their point of need, while ensuring students can also experience success in their language learning.

To enable opportunities for effective collaboration and differentiation, where possible classes are timetabled next to another Japanese class of the same year level. This facilitates flexibility of instruction and team-teaching where practical. Care is taken to ensure students have Japanese timetabled on multiple days in Secondary (7–12) classes, ensuring they speak Japanese on as many separate occasions as practicable to increase retention of key knowledge and skills.

In 2022, the College created a Japanese Enhancement Program whereby students enrolling in Year 7 can apply by submitting a formal written application. Successful students are provided an enriched curriculum, with access to further language structures and vocabulary, in addition to co-curricular opportunities. Students in this class have a high level of engagement with their Japanese language studies and are constantly seeking further opportunities to use their language beyond the classroom. The Japanese Enhancement Program has received interest from students across all feeder schools and will continue to drive success in language learning into the future, including higher participation in co-curricular Japanese programs, and increased numbers of students in VCE Japanese classes.

Underpinning all of the above is a constant stream of advocacy at all levels of College life, and the unwavering commitment of a dedicated group of Japanese teaching staff. From the day-to-day work of the subject teachers in classes, through curriculum leaders to instructional leaders and principal-class staff, there is a consistent narrative about the importance of learning Japanese. This can range from conversations with students, to strategic discussions around the construction of a Japanese-style garden or mandating the subject at various year levels. At all times, Japanese is considered an integral part of the College curriculum, and it is attractive to enrolling students and families as they see a clear pathway for language learning through all years of schooling.

## BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

### BENEFITS

Many and varied benefits have come from the Language Leadership at Mernda Central College. The main benefit lies in the ability to broaden students' global perspectives, their empathy and their respect. The strong correlation between the College's value of respect with that of the language and culture students are studying, has allowed students and teachers to explore deeper-level conversations about core values and attitudes. This in turn has led to a change in attitudes and perceptions about life in everyday Japan, and high-stakes discussions about what is important in both Australian and Japanese societies including the differing responsibilities given to students in Japan and Australia, and environmental issues and concerns.

The program has also led to increased interest in the College, and a greater profile for the teaching and learning of Japanese in the northern suburbs of Victoria. Students selecting Japanese at non-compulsory levels are continuing to rise, and there are many families enquiring specifically about the Japanese program on enrolment. Furthermore, extra-curricular opportunities, such as *taiko* drumming, Japanese cooking and lunchtime origami and language clubs, have attracted high participation rates that reflect students' engagement in the program. A Japan Study Tour offered in 2019 also attracted a high level of interest.

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, the College was still able to conduct virtual lessons with the sister school Shoyoukan Junior High School in Kitakyushu, Japan. These classes further solidified the connection between the two schools and the sharing of language and culture. Additionally, while teaching staff in some subjects found it difficult to engage students in remote learning, the Japanese team found new and engaging methods to maintain student learning. This included the creation of videos that modelled appropriate language usage. These methods received positive feedback from students and their families as they were all able to engage collectively in Japanese language learning.

Furthermore, these videos have since become a valuable resource at the school when staff have been absent. A Casual Relief Teacher (CRT) or the covering staff member has access to a bank of readymade and recorded lessons, ensuring the continued viability of the program even when the Japanese teacher is absent.

This language program has also led to student success at Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) level for our Year 11 and Year 12 students. In the first graduating cohort of 2022, student results in Japanese led to outstanding Australian Tertiary Admissions Rankings (ATARs) received by students in the class, including the College Dux who received a study score for Japanese of 45 (the highest possible score being 50). This placed the student in the top 2% of students across the state who took Japanese. The VCE results vindicated the support and commitment of the College to the Japanese program, and more importantly led to fantastic university and career opportunities for the students. Moreover, the experience of learning Japanese left an indelible mark on all the students in the class, as they left the College with a life-long passion and interest in Japan and Japanese culture. With the program now established, we hope that many more students will experience similar levels of success in the future.

## CHALLENGES

As the College has grown, one of the challenges we have faced has been securing and retaining teaching staff, and ensuring that employed staff “buy-in” to the culture and norms we have established. The Japanese program is unique, and Mernda employs more Japanese teachers than most schools in the state. This means we provide opportunities for greater collaboration and planning between staff, but we still have problems retaining staff. The levels of collaboration and planning on offer benefit new teaching staff and provide them with high levels of mentoring and support. The teaching team has also fostered a very strong culture within itself that is not limited to curriculum support, yet the retention of staff remains an issue.

Another challenge the team has had to overcome is the range of student knowledge at Year 7. While not dissimilar to any secondary school, the fact that students coming through from Grade 6 at Mernda Central College have had access to Japanese classes from Prep makes for an even greater disparity between students coming from other feeder schools. Enrolments from these feeder schools account for approximately 60% of students in Year 7 each year. To limit this impact, the college has taken active steps to engage with feeder schools, which has resulted in one of our larger primary feeder schools introducing Japanese classes.

## CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the importance of the strategic leadership, curriculum leadership and structural practices established at Mernda Central College, where consistent advocacy and the unifying and imperative value of respect has driven the success of the Japanese program. The article has explored the methods employed by the College to ensure the relevance and value of the program is paramount. These methods include curriculum approaches and lesson planning so that all students can achieve success. The article has also noted some of the challenges that can affect a nascent program, and some of the ways in which a College can support and enhance their language program. By seeking opportunities, communicating, advocating, and committing to build the best and most sought-after Japanese program on offer, Mernda Central College has established a fully integrated program that will continue to support student learning in, and beyond, the classroom for many years to come.

## REFERENCE LIST

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Department of Education and Training. 2020. "High impact teaching strategies, excellence in teaching and learning," Victoria State Government. Accessed August 22, 2023.  
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/support/high-impact-teaching-strategies.pdf>.

## POSTSCRIPT

In July 2023, Mernda Central College officially opened its Japanese Garden. The garden was opened by Mr Junji Shimada, Consul-General of Japan in Melbourne, with Federal and State members of parliament in attendance. Anne de Kretser, Director of the Monash Japanese Language Education Centre, also attended. This development was a significant milestone for the Japanese program at the College as it set in stone the presence of Japanese language and culture at the College. The garden provides a peaceful location for students and staff to sit, reflect and appreciate the beauty of nature and the message of the garden—that of fall seven times, rise eight—as it encourages resilience in the students of Mernda Central College. Like our Japanese program, the plants in this garden are now taking root, and with nourishment, care, time and patience will grow into an important part of the lives of each student who comes into the College.