

## **Making a difference: A different way of being a teacher in an alternate educational setting**

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### **Abstract**

Alternate or non-traditional educational settings within Australia have undergone a period of expansion over the past two decades, with a greater range of opportunities being afforded to both students and teachers. Although very little research has been conducted, most studies to date have concentrated on the student experience of education in such settings. There has been minimal focus on teachers, particularly in relation to self perceptions and what it might mean to be a teacher in an environment that differs substantially from the type of educational setting in which many teaching careers had begun. This paper outlines part of a longitudinal study involving the School for Student Leadership (SSL), an alternate educational setting in Victoria, Australia, which offers residential programs for Year 9 students. The focus of the school is on the development of self-understanding and positive relationship building through a holistic approach that is underpinned by the philosophy of cooperative learning. Not all teachers would choose to teach in this type of school, so this project aimed to investigate the hopes and aspirations of the teachers working in the SSL. The findings illustrated a genuine commitment to the principles underpinning the core moral purpose of the SSL and the concomitant level of involvement required. While most did not see their role as teacher to be substantively different from their earlier perceptions, they acknowledged the difference in emphasis that was both possible and necessary within the different context of the setting.

### **Introduction**

The Victorian State Government has invested heavily in the planning, building and the development of the SSL, which began operating in 2001 as the Alpine School situated in Dinner Plain in the Victorian Alps. Since then two further campuses have been added - the Snowy River campus near the mouth of the Snowy River at Marlo in East Gippsland and Gnurad-Gundidj, which is adjacent to Mount Noorat near Camperdown in Victoria's Western District. The school, with its three campuses, provides a nine-week residential program for year nine students and has a major focus on developing leadership through a community-learning model. This holistic approach to learning relies on the building of positive relationships between staff and students as well as between the students as a group. This is supported through a non traditional curriculum that utilises cooperative learning principles to assist the development of self understanding and environmental awareness.

While programs such as those offered within the SSL have gained in popularity in both the public and private school sectors, there is limited empirical research, which is why an ongoing research partnership was developed between the SSL and members of the Education Faculty of the Gippsland campus of Monash University. Since 2001 a number of research projects have been conducted, mainly in relation to the student perspective. However, the opening of the third campus in 2009 and the concomitant expansion of teaching staff, lent itself to a refocusing of interest on teachers and their perceptions of the SSL. As there has been little research into cooperative learning in residential and alternate settings in Australia, this study is particularly relevant. It is further anticipated that this research will help to fill a number of gaps in the literature relating to innovative teaching and learning practices and the nature of cooperative learning as a means to build relationships between staff and pupils

## Theoretical framework and related literature

The pedagogical approach utilised at the SSL draws on and builds upon the theories of both experiential learning and cooperative learning, which are grounded in the work of educational theorist Dewey (1938). He argued that for learning to be meaningful it had to be orientated to student interests and needs, be active in that students had to be involved in the experience and required reflection so students could articulate and transfer their learning to other contexts (Dewey, 1938). Preliminary research at the SSL suggests that the school tends to draw upon the dominant understandings of learning, through experience and the development of relationships through supportive team structures, which also pervades much of the experiential and outdoor education literature.

The intent of the SSL, as implied by its name, is to promote leadership behaviours in the Victorian school community with a view to equipping young people to be better able to engage successfully in an increasingly complex and global world. In order to ascertain how this occurring we are examining teacher perceptions about the type of learning that occurs at the SSL and recognise that learning can be seen as “knowledge in the making” (Ellsworth (2005) achieved through cooperation, rather than through competition or through individual pursuit. Ellsworth (2005) argues that knowledge, as it is commonly used in education, is something that is dead and has been ‘done’ whereas “knowledge in the making” is “continuously evolving through our understanding of the world and our own bodies’ experiences of and participation in that world” (p. 1). Taking this as a starting point in conceptualising knowledge and the processes of learning enables teachers to move beyond the measurement of ‘outcomes’ and the seeking of the ‘things’ that students learn that has dominated so much of the literature associated with experiential education and mainstream education. Ellsworth (2005) further argues “by focusing on the means and conditions, the environments and events of knowledge in the making, it opens an exploration in to the experience of the learning self” (pp. 1-2).

The residential nature of the SSL assists in providing integrated, authentic and cooperative teaching and learning opportunities. Thomson (2006) has suggested that schools that become involved in community projects, such as the SSL’s Community Learning Program, enabled community building to occur, at least for the life of the project and enriched learning for those involved. Community based learning is integral to the SSL curriculum in the form of service learning which has an established history in America (Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain & Neal, 2004). However there is a dearth of research and mixed feelings from teachers about the outcomes of service learning (Seitsinger, 2005). In a review of the service learning literature, Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal and Kielsmeier (2006) suggest that service learning may contribute to achieving both academic outcomes and the broader developmental needs of young people. The authors suggest one reason for this is that service learning “provides opportunities for students to experience meaningful participation in various life contexts” (Scales *et al.*, 2006, p. 41). Service learning is grounded in the theories of experiential learning and as such much of the research has been conducted around experiential learning coming from the field of outdoor education. Research in this area has primarily focused on the outcomes of programs (Baldwin, Persig & Magnison, 2004), such as gains in participants’ self-perceptions and coping strategies (Rickson *et al.*, 2004) and an increase in social and interpersonal skills (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997).

While there is an increasing body of research about residential programs, experiential and service learning programs and outdoor learning experiences, the findings remain ambiguous. There are some suggestions of a range of impacts these programs may have on students, but it is unclear what aspects of a program contribute to these and how enduring any changes are. Few studies have explored teachers’ perceptions or the experiences of

their involvement in providing alternative educational opportunities underpinned by cooperative learning principles.

Cooperative learning is an instructional model in which students work together in small, structured, heterogeneous groups to complete group tasks (Dyson, 2002), and in which group members help each other learn while achieving group goals. While there are various approaches to cooperative learning, five essential elements are recommended by Johnson and Johnson (2009). They define cooperative learning as a relationship that requires positive interdependence (a sense of sink or swim together), individual accountability (each of us has to contribute and learn), interpersonal skills (communication, trust, leadership, decision making, and conflict resolution), face-to-face promotive interaction, and processing (reflecting on how well the team is functioning and how to function even better). Positive interdependence exists when students perceive that they are linked to group members in such a way that they cannot succeed unless other group members do. That is, students rely on each other to complete the pre-designed task. Individual accountability refers to students taking responsibility for completing their part of the task for their group. Face-to-face promotive interaction is literally head-to-head discussion within the group while group members are in close proximity to each other. Interpersonal and small group skills are student behaviours that allow free and easy communication between group-mates. They are developed through the tasks in which students participate and may include listening, shared decision making, taking responsibility, giving and receiving feedback, and encouraging each other. Group processing is usually in the form of an open dialogue or group discussion related to the lesson content that can occur at any time during the lesson (Dyson, 2002; Dyson, Lineham & Hastie, 2010).

Gillies (2006) has also suggested that cooperative learning can provide instruction that leads the student to more authentic learning experiences, allows for more active participation, is more meaningful, and empowers students to learn complex content. Furthermore Qin, Johnson and Johnson (1995) indicate that cooperative learning consistently produces higher self-efficacy scores than competitive or individualistic conditions. Researchers in mainstream education have demonstrated that cooperative learning has had a positive effect on academic achievement, self-worth, active learning, social skill development, and equity achievement (Cohen, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 2009). According to Perkins, cooperative learning is grounded in a social constructivist approach to learning (Perkins, 1999), which is a key underpinning philosophy of the SSL.

Overall, most of the related literature comes from a student focussed angle with very little focusing on teacher experiences within alternate settings. While there are some substantive bodies of literature relating to environmental and experiential education (Brown, 2006; Schartner, 2000; Simmons, 1988; Smith-Cabasto & Cavern, 2006) from a teaching perspective, none of this really captures the breadth of the type of program offered through the SSL.

Therefore this project aimed to fill in some of the gaps in the literature relating to teacher perceptions of working in alternate educational settings. According to Prosser and Trigwell (1999), teacher perceptions play an important role in determining the learning context for students. They suggest that the learning context provided by a teacher is the practical implementation of the teacher's perceptions of learning and teaching. Thereby, teachers who perceive learning as the accumulation of information are more likely to view teaching in terms of the transference of information, whereas teachers who view learning in terms of conceptual change are more likely to utilise a student centred approach to their practice. This encourages independence in learning through discussion, debate and questioning among students culminating in conceptual change (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999). Martin (2006) also supports the notion of a relationship between teachers' perceptions in terms of their enjoyment of and confidence in teaching and

the impact this has on their affective orientation towards their students (for example, through teacher-student relationships).

A particularly important aspect of this research involved an investigation into how participants perceived the role of 'teacher' in the alternate settings provided by the SSL and whether these differed from earlier perceptions they held of themselves as teachers. Teachers were asked to reflect on their experience in relation to the following three research questions:

1. What do you perceive as the core moral purpose of the SSL and is there a good match between rhetoric and practice?
2. What does it mean to be a teacher in an alternate educational setting like the SSL?
3. What benefits and challenges come with teaching in an alternate setting such as the SSL?

This paper concentrates specifically on the second research question looking at teacher perceptions about teaching at the SSL, an area that has received little attention in the research literature.

## Research methods and findings

Since the first year of operation, with a single campus (the Alpine School campus), there has been a partnership with a team of researchers from the Faculty of Education at Monash Gippsland who have gathered data in surveys and interviews relating to student and staff perceptions. Each school term begins with a new cohort of approximately 45 Year 9 students at each campus, drawn from across Victorian government secondary schools (generally no more than 4 students from any particular school). There are 11 fulltime teaching staff plus a number of support staff at each campus.

Utilising a mixed methods framework, all 11 teachers at each of the 3 campuses were invited to complete an online survey and participate in a semi-structured interview. All 33 teachers participated in the interviews which were conducted in November and December of 2009, and 30 completed the online surveys.

The survey was created in SurveyMonkey, an online survey software and questionnaire tool. The questions were developed in consultation with the school Principal, Mark Reeves, utilising research findings from previous research at the school and informed by ideas drawn from the very limited body of literature on teaching in alternate settings. During the final term of 2009, the 33 staff members across the 3 campuses were provided with a weblink to access the survey over a two week period with 30 completed responses received. The survey comprised 3 parts – Section A which included background details such as age, gender, qualifications and teaching and other employment experience Section 2 comprised 30 statements related to teaching in the SSL, which required responses according to a likert scale where 1 signalled disagreement and 5 signalled agreement. Section C was for extended responses relating to issues touched on in section B and other aspects related to the experience of teaching in the alternate environment provided by the SSL. Following the survey period, each campus was visited to conduct interviews with all willing staff – at each campus every staff member willingly participated in the semi-structured interviews, which lasted for an average of 30 minutes.

Data from the teacher interviews were analysed using constant comparison and inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) to develop and consider emergent themes. The constant comparison method (Patton, 1990) was used as the main tool in examining the data. Representative quotes were drawn from the interviews, after repeated reading and re-reading of the data. This formed the first-order analysis, which showed thematic descriptions of the implementation of cooperative learning. In the first instance, descriptive codes were used to identify potentially interesting behaviours and events. More inferential coding then followed this in which conceptual linkages were made that was used

in the development of new categories. This second order of analysis explored the patterns that emerged from the implementation of this innovative program.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that researchers establish trustworthiness of the data by demonstrating that the work has credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility has been achieved through extended engagement with the school. There have been frequent site visits to the three campus of the School for Student Leadership for observation and discussions with students and teachers over a ten-year period. One of the researchers has been the constant link with the school over this period of time.

Throughout the process, peer debriefing with colleagues was also considered to be an important part of the data analysis. The non-participant observation, interviews analysis, and field notes triangulated the findings. The laying out of an audit trail, from an international colleague that is familiar with this research, but not directly involved with it, has enhanced the dependability of the findings. This colleague was in an appropriate position to challenge the logic behind our interpretations and the conclusions subsequently drawn, resulting in a much more reflective process and account than would otherwise not have been possible. We have therefore attempted to satisfy Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criterion of conformability by providing a reflexive, self-critical account by triangulating our findings and interpretations.

## **Results and Discussion**

The information gleaned from surveying and interviewing the 33 teachers at the SSL provided some valuable insights into what it means to be a teacher in an alternative educational setting. Although these teachers came from a range of backgrounds and had varied educational experiences there was a commonality in their perceptions about the role that they played as educators in the SSL. Most staff readily acknowledged that their role as teacher in this setting was more about guiding, mentoring and facilitating learning, and less about curriculum content knowledge and academic outcomes. There was a high level of commitment on the part of the teachers to the underpinning philosophy of the school, which was steeped in the principles of cooperative learning. Along with the opportunities afforded by the residential nature of the program, most participants felt that the SSL provided greater opportunities for matching their philosophy with their practice. It is for this reason that a number of respondents anticipated that there would be some difficulty in returning to mainstream settings. These insights are discussed in the following presentation of results.

### **1. Survey Results**

#### **Section A: Background data**

Altogether 30 teachers participated in the survey, comprising 16 (53% ) males and 14 (47%) females. Age range was heavily weighted to the younger age brackets with 80% of respondents aged between 21 and 39. This was evenly divided with 12 (40%) in the 21-29 age bracket and 12 (40%) in the 30-39 age bracket. This type of demographic is unusual in Australian school settings where male secondary teachers make up approximately 40% of staff (Masanauskas, 2010) and the average age bracket is much higher. Currently the proportion of Government teaching service staff aged 45 years and over is 53%, with 20% in the 50–54 year cohort and less than 10% in the 35–39 year cohort (DEECD, 2008).

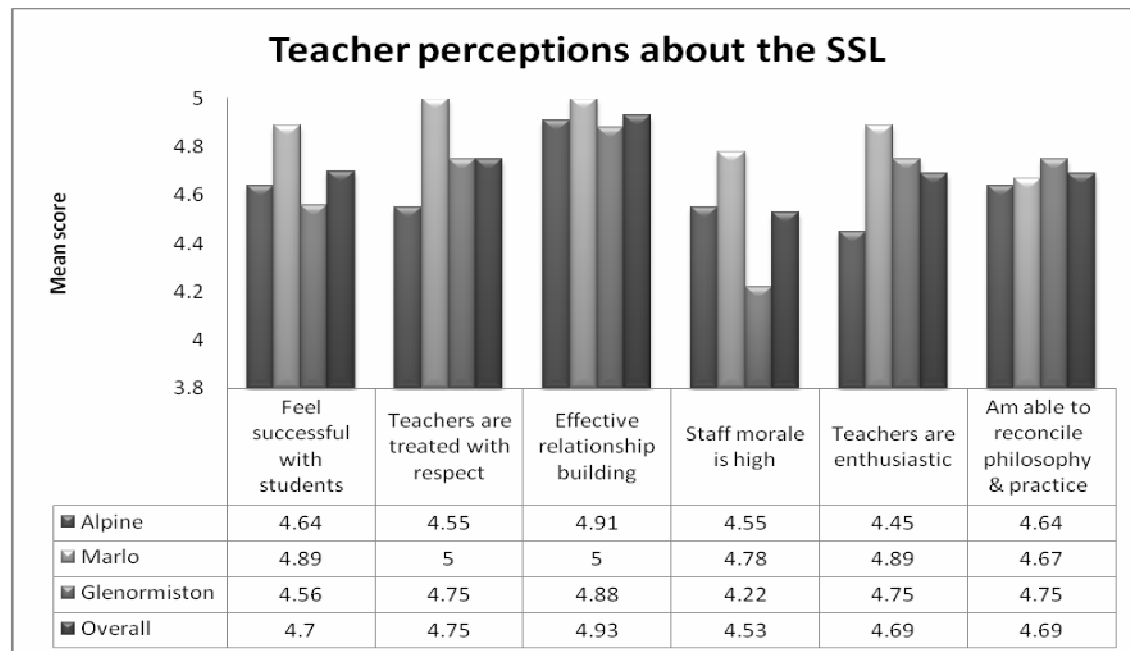
The representation from the 3 campuses of the SSL was fairly even, with all 11 staff members from the Alpine campus completing the survey and 9 from both Glenormiston and Marlo, with one response not identified. The length of time that teachers had been teaching at the SSL varied from less than a year (43%) to more than 5 years (10%). While the school is about to celebrate its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Marlo campus has only been open since 2007



and the Glenormiston campus since 2009, so it is not unexpected that almost two thirds of the staff were fairly new. While most were new to the SSL, the range of teaching experience was more diverse, with more than half of the teachers (57%) reporting 3 or more years teaching experience in other settings, and a fifth being quite experienced with more than 10 years of teaching background. This will undoubtedly impact on how teachers perceive the experience as the new teachers only have their university practicum experiences to use as a basis for comparison. However, as the aim of the research was to illicit understandings about how teachers perceive themselves in this alternate setting, the diversity of insights was viewed as enlightening rather than limiting.

## Section B: Teacher perceptions

A number of questions in this section of the survey touched on the areas of focus for this paper, including the five that are included in Figure 4. These related to how teachers perceived their roles and relationships as teachers in the SSL. These questions involved Likert scale responses with 1=disagree, 2=partially agree, 3=undecided, 4=partially agree and 5=agree.



**Figure 4: Teacher perceptions about teaching in the SSL**

While results in each instance were very positive, with all rating a mean score above 4, there were small differences apparent between the 3 campuses. It was interesting that teachers in the newest campus (Glenormiston) rated their ability to reconcile their philosophy with their practice slightly higher than the other two, yet their rating for staff morale was the lowest. A possible reason for this is isolation caused distance from the other two campuses which are eight hours away by car. (Dinner Plain and Marlo are only three hours apart and are situated in East Gippsland. Glenormiston is in the western districts of Victoria and distance may be an issue) Overall the Marlo campus ratings were the most consistently positive with slightly more variation in the Alpine and Glenormiston campus responses.

## Section C: Extended responses

The extended response section provided a great deal of data, much more than was anticipated so this discussion will be limited to the issues raised in the above set of questions, which were further explored in a number of the extended response questions:

### **Do you feel that your principles are able to inform your practice more in a setting such as the SSL?**

There were 22 positive responses to this question, where teachers stated that they did feel their principles were more able to inform their practice in the setting provided by the SSL. The following examples are illustrative of the range of responses made by members of each of the campuses:

*"Definitely. Small groups, fewer major discipline issues, less time with reporting, assessing and paperwork, longer contact time with students and less interruptions make it a much more practical setting to achieve our particular outcomes"*

*"Yes I feel that we as teachers are put into a position where our values and personal day to day attributes are on show to the community everyday...it is a lot about the way we 'act' interact, react and teach. The curriculum has been developed over time, and is fantastic, it is up to us to deliver it though"*

*"YES. I can focus more on development of self esteem and understanding of self as it is of a higher importance than delivery of set curriculum. I can focus more on teachable moments and context-relevant cues in my teaching"*

*"Yes. 1. The residential nature of the school enables you to engage students on a different Teacher / Student level, this in turn provides many opportunities for "Teachable" moments, times mostly out of class time where real life learning can take place. This is extremely limited in a mainstream setting. 2. Experiential Curriculum - the hands on learning, the experiences, the journeys, the reflective cycles all enable students to challenge themselves and their own learning".*

There were four responses where teachers indicated they were undecided about the role that the setting played, and one stating that it did not make a difference to their practice:

*"No, I think my principles are relevant and inform my practice whether I am in a mainstream school or not".*

### **Do you see yourself as challenging the status quo of education?**

This question elicited a mixed set of responses, with approximately 70% perceiving that what they were doing at the SSL as challenging the status quo, while the remaining 30% were less certain, pointing out the privileged position they held enabling them to be an innovative part of "the system". The following responses are illustrative of the commentary made by teachers:

*Yes and No. What we do at SSL is special. Our program is unique in Australia if not the world. Though much of what we do is based on sound experiential educational practices which have been around for some time. What makes us different to the status quo in education is we are a staff intensive, residential program in a superb, remote location. These qualities I firmly believe are at the core of what makes us unique and different to the status quo in education. Mainstream schools cannot replicate the remoteness or residential components, nor should they".*

*"Yes, I would love to see the whole education system turned upside down. Life skills and appreciation of 'self' are arguably as important as Maths, English etc. Outdoor Education should be compulsory! Young people need to be taken out of their personal comfort zone and immersed in the outdoors".*

*"No, I see myself working together with other educational professionals to create better education. I think the status quo of education needs to continue to develop and could be better, but I don't see that we need to challenge anyone or anything, but work together to offer all students whether they are year 9 or not, the most relevant and useful education that is possible. Our program, being unique and innovative offers one avenue for other schools and teachers to learn and take ideas from for their own schools. I don't like the idea that we are 'better' than normal education, we are all part of the same system".*

*"Hard question to answer because I'm not really sure what the status quo is. If you are asking me if I feel like I'm giving students the opportunity to explore themselves with who they, their purpose for being and where they are going in the world, I would say yes".*

## **2. Interview data**

All thirty three teachers willingly engaged in semi-structured interviews, which took place at their school campus a few weeks after they had completed surveys. It was intended to provide teachers with an opportunity to expand on the ideas and issues raised in the survey and this definitely happened in the majority of cases.

In interviews, the issues were drawn out further through the following question: **How would you perceive your role as a teacher in this educational setting compared to a more traditional educational (secondary college) environment?**

There was considerable variation in responses, but a common theme that ran through the data was the change of emphasis from content to context, which is not surprising in light of the different focus that is placed on traditional content in the SSL. The participants spoke of being educators, mentors and facilitators rather than teachers and focused more on discussing relationships and communication rather than achieving outcomes. Three interview excerpts have been chosen to illustrate how the opportunities that were afforded by the alternate setting were capitalised on by the teachers, and how they viewed that their role as teacher was able to be more flexibly interpreted in this different context. It also illustrated how much easier it was to adopt and inculcate positive strategies and ideas such as those which underpin cooperative learning, into the learning environment.

*"I think I have a supportive role, like I probably support students more as a, more than a direct role of teaching as such, yeah so, as I said, in the community learning project teams, students initiate their own learning, they actually go about it and do their own work themselves and make the phone calls themselves but I am there for them to support them and to guide them in the right direction and yeah, I guess when I was in primary school it's very much, teacher directed a lot of the time and it, yeah it's almost telling off all the time as well"*

*"I see it a lot differently in that we do a lot of, kind of stepping back and allowing the students much more, we've got a lot more time, I think, to allow the students to get in there, do things the way they do it, make a few mistakes, fix it up, learn from it. We're not rushed so much because the lesson, a lot of the time is for them to grow through that kind of experience. So, it's not necessarily task orientated, it's what they're trying to achieve while they are doing a particular task. And so I think, in that way, from teaching in the schools that I've taught in before, which have been mainstream schools, where there's not as much time I guess to be able to focus on, yes students actually getting through things and it's kind of getting to that point, and, and you know, a lot of the time has to be hurried instead of watching them, kind of go through those, fumble through it, learn from it and try it again, and not helping, not stepping into, helping but in a different way, not kind of stepping in too much, letting them*



*make those decisions and yes, which can be longer, takes longer but that's what we've got time for, if that makes sense?"*

The following conversations from the interviews highlight some examples of where the principals of cooperative learning are inherent in perceptions of the staff at the SSL in relation to being a teacher. The following example, from a teaching and learning perspective, illustrates a number of Johnson and Johnson's (2009) suggestions about what cooperative learning involves. The focus on interpersonal skill development through communication, trust and leadership, and the face to face promotive interaction are particularly relevant here:

Q: Would you perceive your role as an educator different in this setting to a traditional setting or a mainstream school setting?

*A: I definitely see myself as more of a facilitator than a teacher, and I guess you might say it's the same thing but I think it's definitely about asking the right questions, rather than telling kids what to do, asking them questions to try and get them to figure it out for themselves and just having discussions and working through things that way.*

Q: So it's really about encouraging thinking? Which really, I suppose is the goal of education.

*A: Well it is, but I guess in a mainstream school, sometimes it's pretty hard, like when you're delivering material, I guess you're delivering to so many and, I guess sure, you try and have discussions but I think it's a lot easier here when you've only got a small group to look after and work through things. And it is – yeah, I guess really, just trying to step back and let them figure out things for themselves, and when it doesn't – like trying to let them make the mistakes and then get the learning from it, rather than jumping in too early, and I think that was something that takes a while to learn and feel comfortable with. Especially when you're out in the outdoors, it's sort of finding that line where, alright this is unsafe now, I've got to say something, or do I really need to say something, they might be walking for an extra hour, does that matter, or-*

Q: Do you, as a teacher find it hard to let go and to reduce that control over what's happening?

*A: I do, but I think I'm quite a patient person, so I can tolerate kids sort of having an argument, without jumping in. so, I think I'm quite good at being able to step back now, definitely – early on I would probably jump in a bit early – but, yeah I can definitely see that I've improved in that and feel comfortable with it, how I facilitate groups.*

In another interview, there is evidence of positive interdependence and individual accountability:

Q: Would you perceive your role as an educator different in this setting to a traditional setting or a mainstream school setting?

*A: I foresee that our role is, that an educator here and this is more of a, a role modelling facilitator role, rather than the stereotypical normal teaching role as such, standing up in front of a class and saying "This is what you will do now". We try to guide them into becoming more independent and responsible and mature people, young adults rather than treating them as students and children. Try to give them that, that independence and respect as a, as an adult, as an equal person.*

Q: So, really the purpose of the school differs from more traditional ones?

*A: Yes - there is a different emphasis, it's not so much about the English and the Maths and the Geography, this is more life skills and how to deal with, to finding out who the student is, like, so they can find themselves and who they're going to be, what, what their place in the*

*world can be, their potential to be in the world when they leave. Rather than, you know, what algebra is?*

Q: So, there's a lot less telling here?

A: *Heaps, no, no telling.*

Q: And a lot less teaching?

A: *Teaching in the traditional sense, definitely less, it's with, we tried to create situations that the students can learn from it without us telling so, the difference is, being a teacher in that sense of creating a situation that the student will learn from rather than tell the student what they're going to learn.*

Another facet highlighted in the following conversation, was the importance of the context, which in the case of the SSL provided more opportunities for the development of positive interdependence and the development of interpersonal skills:

Q: Would you perceive your role as an educator different in this setting to a traditional setting or a mainstream school setting?

A: *No I'd like to think I would be the same in a mainstream school setting, but I think there are a lot more limitations in a mainstream school setting, we don't have here, so you don't-*

Q: So what are those?

A: *Well I'm thinking relationship wise you don't have kids 24/7 in a normal school, they've got a lot of other distractions around them, they go home, there's so many other influences occurring, the large number of kids that you deal with in a classroom, you just don't get to know kids on the level that we do, that - that more intimate knowledge about them about them as people and I think that is one of our strengths that we have really good staffing levels, have the time to follow a lesson whichever way it goes and you're not teaching to a set curriculum for the VCE, like it's not all about teaching to a test, it's about going with the flow and being lead by the students a lot of the time about what their needs are and where they need – what they need to learn.*

Q: So it's teaching, it's finding the teaching moments?

A: *Yeah absolutely, yeah finding the teachable moments and exploiting them in a way through here, the outdoors through different mediums, mm.*

Q: You see some big links between what you teach indoors and what you – what happens or what you teach outdoors?

A: *Yeah I think very much so, I think the more I work here the more I can see how everything fits together like a big puzzle and even like our beliefs and values which we spend quite a bit of time talking about at the beginning of the term, how that weaves its way in through everything else that they do while they're here so yeah it's very much about what we teach in the classroom that can be applied in the bigger picture when they're outside and in the outdoors as well.*

## **Conclusion**

This research investigated perceptions of teachers in a unique educational setting in Victoria, seeking insights into what it meant for them to be a teacher in this context. Although the teachers were diverse in terms of their backgrounds and experience, there was a commonality in the responses suggesting that the alternate setting provided a framework for their shared perceptions about teaching and learning. As suggested by Prosser and Trigwell (1999) and Martin (2006), the learning context provided by a teacher is the practical

implementation of their perceptions of learning and teaching which ultimately underpins their practice. In this instance, teachers reported positive beliefs about their role as facilitators or mentors and the associated impact they were having on student learning. Furthermore they recognised that the focus of the school was firmly centred upon the development of self-understanding and the building of positive interpersonal relationships together with the practical implementation of the principles of cooperative learning as outlined by Johnson and Johnson (2009). As such a focus on positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal skill development, face-to-face promotive interaction and processing reflection, were all promoted in this alternate setting. Indeed the findings illustrate a genuine commitment to the principles underpinning the core moral purpose of the SSL and the concomitant level of involvement required. Whilst most did not see their role as teacher to be substantively different from their earlier perceptions and beliefs, they acknowledged the difference in emphasis and the heightened opportunity provided by this setting to marry their philosophy with their practice.

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