

As a Secondary School teacher in a Prep-Year 12 school, I have always looked upon my Junior School colleagues with a twinge of envy in the way in which they can deeply explore a topic in great depth without having the restrictions of segregated classes and periods to stop me in mid-train of thought. I recall my Year 5 teacher working us up to 'Smartie Maths' where the statistics related to packs of mini-smarties formed the basis of a week long mathematics project in the data collection of various statistics and experiments culminating in the creation of graphs and the reward of finally eating our (probably grubby and far from today's OH&S expectations) packet of 13 smarties. Yes, 20 years on, I still remember that there were 13 in a pack. Rarely do secondary school teachers, and more importantly, the students, get to immerse themselves deeply in an area of learning where they can participate in a sustained investigation, inquiry or exploration. Yet Year 9 students at Overnewton Anglican Community College find themselves doing this eight times a year.

At the Year 9 centre, Canowindra, students are provided with a unique Year 9 experience. Our students have choice and ownership over their learning through a broad range of electives. There are real life experiences provided through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award which includes volunteer work in the local community, challenging journeys in the outdoors and commitments to learn a new skill and improve fitness. In the 'Activities' program students participate in one year long, authentic, real-life experience, such as the alternative energy, 'Racing for the Future' program, the creation of model solar vehicles, as well as dance and drama performances, rock bands and movie making. We know that these experiences and opportunities form some of the greatest memories and growth in our students.

In addition to this, Canowindra offers a distinctive 'Focus Week' program. For eight weeks a year we throw out the timetable. Core programs (English, Maths, Science, Humanities, PE, Religion and Languages) cease

and students rotate through eight authentic, week-long learning units. These range from Outdoor Education camps, the creation of a children's story book designed with and for an assigned Junior School 'buddy', and the exploration of local ecosystems, to designing and planning (including the mathematical measurement issues) their own home. We also include programs which develop life skills, such as the 'City Experience' program where students become confident navigating the public transport system and city centre independently, to provide more than an academic focus. 'Active Kids' requires a group of Year 9s to investigate fundamental motor skills then develop and run a morning of tabloid activities based on these skills for 72 Junior School students. Another program has students developing a performing arts event to present to the rest of the cohort at our weekly chapel service. 'My Place Our Place' offers an opportunity for deep investigation into students' own family immigration stories.

Student engagement with traditional programs typically drops away at this age. 14 to 15 year olds are more likely to learn what they consider useful, enjoy real life problems, prefer active over passive learning and seek adult-like roles. Peer influence increases and they learn better with peers. They are more engaged when learning outside the classroom, doing real tasks with real deadlines for real clients or audiences. Focus Weeks help provide this through authentic and relevant learning experiences, which develop 21st century skills. Students collaborate, think creatively and problem solve. Notebook computers, Web 2.0 tools, smartphones, blogs, digital photography, podcasts and more, all pop up during Focus Weeks.

Our students and staff love Focus Weeks. It's a time to take a step away from the regular curriculum and immerse ourselves in something different, something fresh and challenging and something meaningful with a new group of people.

