



Dripstone Middle School Case Study



School Context: Dripstone Middle School is located in Darwin, Northern Territory and delivers a variety of both academic and specialist subjects to students in Years 7, 8 and 9. The school has 520 students from diverse multicultural backgrounds, with a lower than national average socio-economic-status. 20% of our learners identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. To cater for individuals needs the school offers a variety of engagement, wellbeing and academic programs.

Network of Inquiry and Innovation NT

The Network of Inquiry and Innovation Northern Territory (NOII NT) was formed in collaboration with three other local schools. These included two primary schools Nakara and Wagaman, and Nemarluk School which caters for students with additional needs. Each school selected 5 teachers who were who were given the opportunity to train in the Spiral of Inquiry approach. Together they began their journey into what is going on for our learners and what actions can be taken to make the biggest difference.

Dripstone Middle School Spirals Team: Our team consists five teachers who teach in different subject areas to bring diversity to the team across faculty areas. The team meets on a fortnightly basis, where they work together through the Spiral, reflecting on where they are now and taking collective action.

SCAN (What is going on for our learners?)

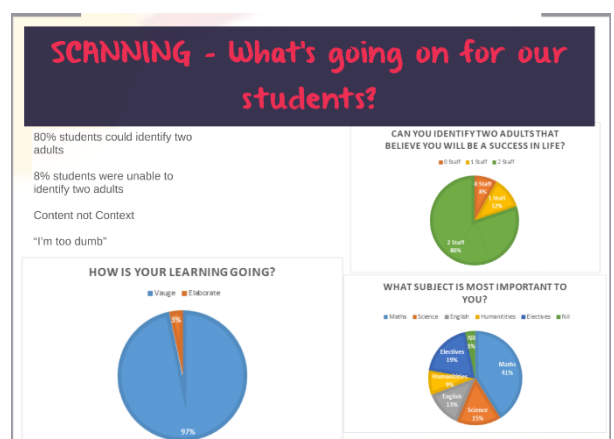
Unintentionally, we went into the scanning phase with a Hunch already in mind. The assumption was that as adolescents, our students would have a negative attitude towards schooling and their teachers, and therefore would struggle to identify two adults who believed in them. We interviewed a large proportion of the student cohort based on the four Spirals key questions and discovered that the answers did not support our initial Hunch. We discovered that 80% of our students were able to identify two adults that believed in them. In addition, 12% were at least able to identify one adult, leaving only 8% that said they could not.

When asked ‘*What they were learning and why it was important?*’ students tended to identify what they were doing, rather than what they were learning, e.g. “fractions”, “chemistry” or “narratives”. The most common reply regarding the importance of their learning was that they needed the subject for their future careers, or for when they get into Senior School. Very few students were able to see the relevance in their learning.

In reply to how they were going, 97% of all responses were vague, such as “good” or “alright”. When asked to elaborate, approximately one third referenced their grades to justify their learning. For example, “I’m getting C’s so I’m doing alright”. Another common response was “I’m not talking as much in class”, which was indicative of their behaviour, not their learning.

FOCUS (What can make the biggest impact?)

The findings from our Scan Phase revealed that students were generally unable to articulate progress in their learning. Scan revealed that students typically used their A-E grades as a measure of their learning growth and identified that maintaining the same grade is not making progress.



We decided to Focus on helping students understand learning growth by creating a positive learning culture using a Growth Mindset to replace the perception that achievement was only reflected by a high A-E Grade.

Our Scan also indicated that students frequently made negative remarks about their learning capabilities such as “I’m dumb” and “I’m too stupid to learn this.” Our Focus was also to explicitly teach our learners about what are learner traits and used the concept of James Nottingham’s ‘Learning Pit’ to achieve this. This became a visible model for students to understand and take ownership of their learning with a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. We needed to create a positive and growth-mindset learning culture for our students, in order for them to visualise their learning journey and recognise growth no matter how small.

DEVELOPING A HUNCH (What is leading to the situation?)

From the Scan and Focus phase we found that the issues were that students could not identify learning growth, did not understand the traits required to be a good learner and had developed fixed mindsets about their learning capability. We looked at the possible reasons behind this mindset and felt that we as teachers place too much emphasis on Summative Assessment and A-E grades rather than celebrate the progress achieved and gains made. We also wondered if we were contributing to student’s reluctance to take risks in their learning and ability to persevere to improve. We evaluated our own teaching practices by asking the question: do we as teachers promote a growth mindset in our classrooms? Do we model a growth mindset?

One way we could tell was that the language we used in class was not always student-friendly, especially when it came to our Learning Intentions and Success Criteria. We often used complex words from the curriculum that meant nothing to students. Furthermore, we developed a culture where we focused on summative assessment and celebrating high marks as opposed to acknowledging small growth related to daily learning.

To see whether our hunch was correct, we did a mini check-in with our student voice. This gave us great insight into what they thought of teachers and our teaching practices. The feedback that we received was that students felt that the learning intentions and goals were not effectively communicated.

LEARNING (What do we need to learn?)

Our learning started with ‘The Learning Pit’ (James Nottingham) and Growth Mindset (Carol Dweck) and how to teach these in different classrooms for different subjects. We read ‘Educating Ruby’ by Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas to understand what it is to build self-regulated learners with an understanding of their learning and its process. It introduced us to the ‘Seven C’s’ - confidence, curiosity, collaboration, communication, creativity, commitment and craftsmanship to build character and skills as lifelong learners. We learnt that we were in the ‘Learning Pit’ and through our learning identified the learner traits required to get out of the pit. We started to look at ways to put a growth mindset into practice and reflected on whether or not we held a belief that every student can learn and it was up to us as teachers to have an open mind to foster that. This built on the learning that our teachers had done in the previous year on the importance of building strong relationships with our students to reinforce the message that we believed in their success as learners.

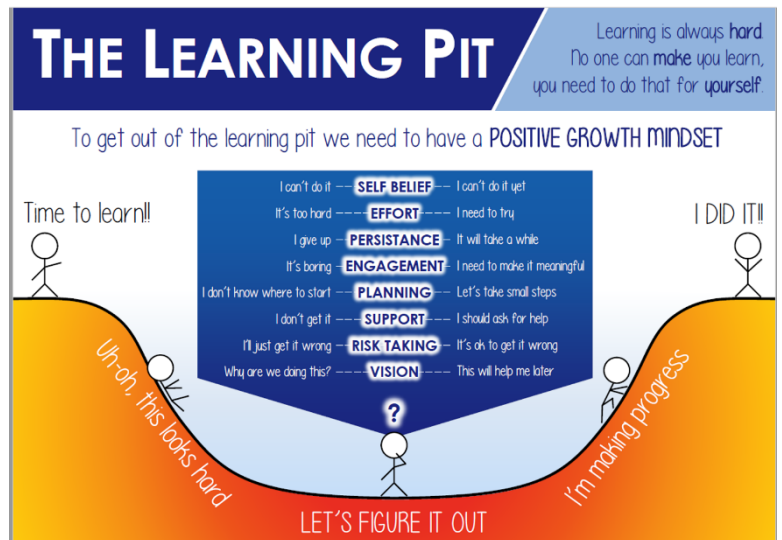
Each teacher designed a series of activities and used a common language when talking about a growth mindset and the Learning Pit.

ACTION (What will we do differently?)

Taking action was a collaborative activity. It involved our team to learn more deeply about new ways of doing things and trying it out. The question for our team was ‘What can we do differently to make a meaningful impact on our learners’? As a team we decided to continue to build on our teacher –student relationships to create a positive classroom culture for learning. We introduced growth mindset and used James Nottingham’s Learning Pit strategy. We designed a Learning Pit poster which included the use of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria.

Students were given challenges and were required to work together to find solutions to problems. We hoped that this would develop problem solving skills as well as shift their mindset.

Our team used Learning pit posters to make learning more visible for students. Students could draw a learning pit and place themselves in the pit and then write out strategies as to how they could learn more effectively. This also helped students understand what they were doing and what areas they needed help in. We also used Dylan William's Formative Assessment strategies to assess the learning taking place in the classroom and what adjustments were required for our teaching. We shared the posters and strategies at a general staff meeting with all staff and provided each teacher with a Learning Pit poster.



Checking (Have we made enough of a difference?)

We started our checking phase by interviewing students just as we did during our scanning phase. In this process it was discovered that the groups we worked with could reference the learning and use the common language to articulate their progression. They understood learning is a journey and is not just about getting good grades. Students also understood that learning is hard and they need to persevere to achieve success.

Judging from their responses, the cohort that responded best to our action phase were our Year 7 sample group. They could use the Learning pit and identify where they were at in their learning. When checking the Year 8 sample group we found mixed responses. Some students could and others were still in the early stages of developing a growth mindset and understanding learner traits. A number of the Year 9 students we worked with still had a fixed mindset and were finding it difficult to make that transition towards a growth mindset. For them grade level attainment was still seen as a reflection of learning and they were reluctant to take risks and to extend themselves in challenging high order thinking activities.

What's next? Reflections.

As we go into our next spiral, we are heavily reflecting on how we went using the spiral process. We know now to not go into the spiral with any assumptions, and instead have an open mind and keep the focus on what is REALLY going on for our learners. Part of our reflection was that the drive we had to keep pushing through the spiral may have caused us to neglect some of the earlier phases.

In the next spiral we will make a conscious effort to ensure we are taking our time and going through the steps as thorough as possible. This will also include conducting more mini spirals throughout the various phases.

In reflection we also know now that our learning needs to focus on both literature reasoning and practical applications. As the old saying goes, don't reinvent the wheel, we should have instead learned about more meaningful ways to teach the learning pit, rather than only learning about its importance.

Our spiral also developed from focusing from the symptoms to the causes, which is an area we need to keep pursuing. There is more going on for our learners than what a surface scan can reveal, and to make enough of a difference we need to push our inquiring into the underlying reasons.

We will focus on self-reflection among staff, and provide them with tools to help cultivate growth mindset in their classes. We want to do more learning in the area of effective teaching strategies, more resource sharing between staff and to share our experience with the whole school. It's always important to leave a place better than when you got there and this is our attempt at that one spiral at a time.

