

MELBOURNE

AUSTRALIA





DAVID, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

“[We use] the money that we’ve got to have the maximum number of people to have relationships and look after all of these students.”

– David

By Mervi Kaukko and Jane Wilkinson

ABOUT DAVID

David – everyone calls him David, teachers, students, families – was the principal of Noble Park Primary School, a public school in the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia for 17 years. Ninety percent of students at the school speak a language other than English as their first language, and about one in four students have experienced forced migration. During David’s leadership, the school took intentional steps away from focusing on standardized testing and adjusted its practices to meet the needs of each student. These changes transformed the curriculum and the school environment to give balanced support not only to children’s academic success, but also their natural playfulness, social competencies, and overall wellbeing.

CREATING RELEVANT CURRICULUM

Australia’s emphasis on standardized curricula and scores on national tests in literacy and numeracy shapes the way many schools approach meeting the needs of students. David found that this standardization and focus on testing disadvantaged newly arrived students and in particular, students of refugee backgrounds.

With his students always front and center, David worked against the grain of what is typically expected from school leaders in Australia in several ways. He said, “Some will argue that our prime responsibility is to make [students at Noble Park] literate but I don’t think it is. I don’t think that’s creating better people. Our responsibility is broader than that, making sure that we bring a whole lot of things into play in children’s learning [and] support an environment which makes it a safe place to learn.” David did not sacrifice the academic side of schooling, he had a larger vision. He insisted with children, teachers, parents and system leaders, that schools can do more than just support the literacy that can be measured by tests.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Core to meeting students' needs at Noble Park were sufficient numbers of caring staff to work with every student, personalize their learning, and create an environment that made all students feel safe and welcome.

Experiences of safety and welcome went hand in hand at Noble Park. David described how at the school, "We're creating a secure place for children to learn." In fact, feeling welcome is not possible without safety for refugee students. David explained, "We have many of our children experiencing trauma as a result of their refugee experience so we have tried to put in as much support as we can, based on where they are at both at a social and emotional level and where they're at at a learning level." David decided to spend most school funds on people, hiring as many staff as possible so the children could be surrounded by caring adults. This approach did not require sacrificing anything. It required "having a resolution to spend all your money [on supporting students]".

EMBRACING PLAYFULNESS

Safety and play worked together at Noble Park and supported all students' education, but this was especially true for students who experienced their absence before coming to this school.

Playfulness was one of the five core values of Noble Park. At Noble Park, students were allowed to build hiding places, huts, treehouses, and hammocks. They also often chose where they would study. These child-built spaces were not cleared away at the end of the school day but left to be, so that students could return and develop them later. While playing, students learned and felt a sense of control over their environment. David said, "Kids are learning every minute of the day – it just doesn't look like it when kids are not in a traditional classroom. There's other ways to skin that cat.... When they go outside there are multiple choices for them to continue their learning but it's sort of like vicariously because they don't necessarily realize their learning when they are building a hub [an outdoor play which the students had built using recycled and nature-based materials] with their friends or spending time with the chooks [chickens]. They are learning about caring for animals or they are learning about their own mindfulness and what they need to do to be calm." Using the outdoors is particularly important in this urban environment, since "the majority of [students] live in flats or apartments so they don't have a play area like that."

Just as he resisted a focus on standardized testing, embracing play – and in particular outdoor play – required David to challenge some of the education system's demands for low risk environments. Like with all situations, David treated risk as a learning moment and trusted the children to be able

to learn from it. He supported students to play freely in the natural environment while encouraging them to make wise choices about riskier play, such as when they were climbing trees.

Learn More about supporting refugee students in Australia, [Leading & Creating Powerful Learning Relationships](#).