

Our Lady of La Vang

Specialist educational facility for students with intellectual disability

11 Malcolm Street

Flinders Park SA 5025

p: 08 8159 2500 e: info@lavang.catholic.edu.au

lavang.catholic.edu.au



Mary Jacquier's farewell to the community

"I have come that you may have life and live it to the full" (John 10:10)

This passage from John's gospel is at the very heart of this school. In partnership with parents and primary caregivers, it drives what we do each and every day to provide a supportive, highly specialised learning environment for the young people with whom we work. At Our Lady of La Vang we believe our students are perfect in every way. They are made in the image and likeness of God ... and God does not do ugly.

After 45 years as a professional educator in Catholic education, my career is coming to an end. However, it has been the last ten years as the appointed leader of St Ann's Special School and now at Our Lady of La Vang, that has given me the opportunity to live my life to the full and to consolidate my most important thinking and learning about education ... what this means...what is important ...why we do things... and how a curriculum, not only appropriate but necessary for these students, is implemented.

For our students to learn and flourish we believe it is fundamentally important that our students:

- **Really know** what it is to be safe and happy (emotionally, physically and spiritually).
- **Really know** what it is to truly belong and so to flourish.
- **Really know** what it is to be deeply respected and accepted for who they are, not what we might want them to be.
- **Really know** what it is to have freedom to be who they are.
- **Really know** what it is to be able to make choices about what they do and how they do it in a safe and supportive environment, as opposed from having things done to or for them all the time.
- **Really know** what it is to have healthy and satisfying relationships with others.
- **Really know** what it is to have a say in what happens to them and have their voices heard however they are able to communicate.
- **Really know** how to get their needs met in socially appropriate ways without being restrained, humiliated, bribed, punished, rewarded, threatened or lied to.
- **Really know** what it is to be free of the limiting expectations that our society has for them.
- **Really know** what it is to learn through play based experiences (because a child's ability to play is a reflection of their cognitive development) and not through mindless training or pointless activity.
- **Really experience** the support and nurture of highly skilled educators needed for them to grow and develop.

These understandings, and the educational practices that are generated by them, are now fully supported by research, evidence and advances in the fields of contemporary learning theories, child development, play based learning and neuroscience. Doing this in an educational setting is not always easy.

It is not easy to implement these beliefs and practices in a society that places great value on external appearances and superficial glamour: it is everywhere on our screens; is in our magazines and newspapers; it towers over us on billboards. Every day we are bombarded with advertisements of every kind to consume products that promise to make us thinner, richer, more attractive to the opposite sex, happier, more beautiful, younger, more supple, and to slow the effects of ageing.

In addition it is not easy to do this in a society that places great value on achievement using traditional interpretations of literacy and numeracy. This thinking leaves no room for the young people in our school to experience success. The benchmarks used by our governments and educational authorities automatically exclude them. Potentially, these attitudes and values condemn students with special needs to a life of educational failure, failure in the eyes of the significant others in their world and in our wider society.

It is also not easy in a world where schools still fundamentally operate and are structured in the same way they were when I was at school... many decades ago now... and where an adult's memory of their school experience influences what they think should happen in **all** schools for **all** children, regardless of whether it is appropriate for a child or not. Academic achievement is often valued much more than the ability to form satisfying and healthy relationships and friendships, to belong, and more than understanding the need to provide an environment supportive of a child's healthy growth and development. They fail to recognise that things like the ability to negotiate, to take turns and to have fun are fundamental in helping young person to best they can be, and are essential for all of us to learn and to live life to the full.

However, despite these obstacles, Our Lady of La Vang has developed into a unique educational learning environment where the boundaries and concepts of traditional schooling have been questioned and changed. For the sake of our students, the rich external and internal learning environments based on a contemporary educational knowledge and practice, support students to have a fulfilling life. They are provided with a highly individualised curriculum that is designed to meet their needs. It is not a watered down version of the curriculum offered to students in mainstream schools. Instead, it is meaningful, developmentally appropriate and purposeful.

That this has been achieved is a tribute to the combined efforts of many people in this school community. They include:

- The parents and primary caregivers, for whom I have the greatest respect, and for your ongoing support of our school. Thank you.
- The passionate, dedicated hard working staff who are committed to learning, because learning **is** their work. Thank you.
- The administration staff of the school who are the public face of Our Lady of La Vang and who work so hard to ensure the smooth running of the school on a day to day basis. In addition they are key to welcoming new people into our school community and in supporting parents, carers and staff through the ups and downs of life. Thank you.
- The members of the School's formal Leadership Team who have supported not only myself, but all staff, in exploring and learning what it means to work at this school. Thankyou.

- To The Board of Management, the Catholic Education Office and Archbishop Philip Wilson who have also supported not only myself but who have fought hard to provide the resources we need to run this school successfully. Thankyou.
- And finally and most importantly of all, the students. From you I have learned so much ... I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Each one of you has helped to shape me into the person I have become today. This is a result of my experience as leader of this truly remarkable school and the many interactions I have had with each of you over many years.

I go with a sad but happy heart. I have loved my time here and have never wanted to be anywhere else. It has been a profoundly satisfying professional experience.... in the best of times and the worst of times ... and there has been a lot of the good and of the bad.

I wish you every best wish and every blessing for now and into the future. I look forward to hearing about how Our Lady of La Vang continues to lead the way in educational thinking and practice, not just in special education but in the field of general education generally. It would be my hope that it not only continues to provide the best possible learning environment for our students but also continues to challenge accepted and traditional ways of thinking about teaching and learning.

May God bless you All,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Maury', followed by a horizontal line.

November, 2014.