



EDITION 9: PODCAST WITH AN EXPERT

- SUNSHINE SPECIAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL

Transcript

Ben Pisani & Nicole Edwards

Ben:	00:01	Hi and welcome to the graduate teacher learning series podcast channel. I'm Ben and I will be hosting this episode in the podcast series. In this podcast series, we are going to look at how the resources within the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model are being used within different Victorian school contexts. The Victorian Teaching and Learning Model or VTLM is made up of resources that as a teacher you can use to develop, implement and monitor learning programs tailored to your students' needs. In this series we will be talking about the High Impact Teaching Strategies or HITS, The Practice Principles and The Pedagogical Model. Teachers can use the VTLM to establish, enhance or modify pedagogical practice to promote excellence and consistency in teaching and learning across the school. Okay, so sit back and relax and let's get into this edition of the graduate teacher learning series podcast, talking to an expert.
Ben:	01:06	Hi and thanks for being part of this podcast. Can you please introduce yourself and tell us a bit about where you are working in your history in education?
Nicole:	01:14	My name's Nicole Edwards and I'm the principal at Sunshine Special Developmental School, which is a great privilege. I've actually been in special schools my whole teaching career. This is my passion and it's what I wanted to do since I was 16. So, for 23 years I've been within specialist settings. Our school here has been part of the education system for 32 years and we are in a mainstream school environment, but we have 170 students, 90 staff, we're in the facilities of a mainstream school, but we're a specialist setting. So, we have two base rooms, one at Ardeer

		Primary School, one at Sunshine Heights Primary School. And we cater to students with a moderate to profound intellectual disability.
Ben:	01:52	16 is quite young to know that you wanted to work in a specialist school. What prompted you for this career choice?
Nicole:	01:59	Uh, I guess I was at that point in high school where you had to go out and do work experience. And I made a decision that I wanted to go to Ascotvale Special School. And I worked with one particular student who that was my role was basically to support one particular student who had autism spectrum disorder. And I just found over two-week period that I was able to achieve so much with him. And whilst it challenged me, which I quite enjoyed, it was absolutely rewarding, and I actually had the amazing privilege of coming full circle about three years ago. I went to their fate and he was that adult, and I actually went up to his mother and said, your son is exactly why I'm doing what I'm doing. So, I had a really profound moment as a 16-year-old, which I know is quite unique and that's exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. So, when I went to university, we didn't have the option then to actually have a placement in a special school. I did challenge my, my college on that and I weren't quite flexible with allowing me to that. So, I then went on and did my fourth year in special ed straight away. And then, I've worked as an E.S. In, in a school whilst I did that fourth year. And then now here I am
Ben:	03:17	Tell us how you have used this Victorian Teacher Learning Model as a whole school planning tool specifically in relation to your Annual Implementation Plan?
Nicole:	03:25	I think we are in a really exciting, place in education at the moment, particularly in special education. So, having traveled the journey for 23 years, whilst we acutely care for our students and we always have, we are absolutely places of learning. And so, we have, and I always have had very high expectations as a teacher of my learners, regardless of their individual needs. And now as a system, it's exciting that special education is actually part of, the education state and its part of the VTLM. So, we now have a curriculum, we're on the curriculum before, the Victorian Curriculum and towards other one we actually weren't. So, we were just expected to teach to the curriculum of the day, which did not encompass the individual learning needs

of particularly our cohort in a special developmental school. So, I find this absolutely exciting. It provides evidence-based practice to which we can connect our teachers to best practice. Teaching is teaching, good teaching is good teaching regardless of whatever setting that you're working in. Obviously, all of our learners, 170 of them have extremely individual needs, but I would say that that's not unique to just our setting. All schools have unique learners and our job as leaders and teachers is to be the best that we can for them every day.

So, as the VTLM now provides this scaffold, this suite of resources, evidence-based practice that we can really as a leader, strategically align our professional learning to our, AIP strategic plan, our resourcing. So, it's been a key driver in actually establishing everything that we do here from, you know, the minute we walk into the school in the morning to when we leave in the afternoon and even on the holidays. Just aligning the work and making the connections, which in special education particularly is absolutely exciting. This is really interesting because FISO obviously, has been, available to us for longer than all of the elements of the VTLM. So, what I found particularly exciting and useful last year, was with all of the resources available to us and at our fingertips, in the principal forum in term four. Uh, last year we actually did a mapping activity where we had all of the VTLM resources out. We came pre-prepared with one of our AIP goals, which has, was around literacy. And we then looked at each of the tools and match what practice principles are actually going to be required to get us, achieving our AIP goal and targets. What HITS do we need to focus on? What part of the pedagogical model are we implementing? You know, at which level we are engaging with that as well. So, our AIP this year is a two-page document, its narrow and focused. Obviously, we have a very detailed AIP on spot, but for staff what we've developed is a two-page AIP and on that AIP is actually the HITS, the practice principles and the pedagogical model and the elements of those that are specific to achieving our AIP targets. And that then as I talked about before, making the connections and the alignment to everything that we do within the school resourcing professional learning, PDPs, all aligns to those elements, which is really exciting.

Ben:

[06:40](#)

As a leader in a school, with your leadership team, how do you support staff with their classroom practice to implement the VTLM

Nicole:

[06:48](#)

so at the start of the year, all of our teachers receive a professional practice manual. In that manual we have our vision and values. We have our strategic plan, our AIP, we have the HITS continuum. We also have all of the key documents that have been released by the department. That also, prior to them coming back to school, they have documentation that has clear, direction around all of our curriculum, teaching and learning, process and cycle for the whole here. We also then distribute a professional learning calendar which connects directly to our AIP and they have the whole time in advance, and they can see, the work and how it aligns to our, to our AIP. So that's one element. It's mapping it term by term our professional learning and making sure that all of the elements that we've identified in our AIP for the VTLM are covered within our professional learning calendar. So that's one layer. It's very strategic. And we also do a whole year overview as a leadership team the year before based on our AIP.

So, our 2019, PL calendar for the whole year, it was developed in term four 2018. Once we developed our AIP, and then we review it every term, have we hit the mark? Is Our data telling us that the staff are achieving what we thought they would around that? If not, do we need to spend a little bit longer on that element? Do we need to push forward and move onto the next thing because we've nailed that? So, it's a very dynamic space. So that's one element. The other layer is a professional practice goal setting, we call it on a Monday. So, we've resourced that. Which is an extra specialist for teachers every term to have protected time with their leading teachers. What they do within that time, the sits alongside their PDP. So, the PDP is quite general and aligned to the AIP. And then each teacher has the opportunity to sit with their leading teacher, do a self-assessment against the VTLM as well as our AIP and our instructional model and identified their area of growth. They then plan that. So, they talk about do I need to do some peer observation? Would that happen in my school or do I need to go external to my school? Do I need to attend professional learning external to the school? Do I, would I benefit from coaching? So, they identify the strategies with which they're going to build that identified practice. So that's our professional practice model. We then, this term have implemented a coaching model. So, all teachers are coached on a five-week cycle. In term three next year it'll be term two in term three. So coaching sits alongside that with a focus on our instructional model, which

includes VTLM components. We also have our professional learning teams. Now they are key drivers to the professional growth of teachers, included in that is assessments against the PLC Matrix and HITS, we do that online and we get information around how, which informs the work that we've done and the resourcing and strategy around growth. Are teachers saying that what we're putting in place is helping them. Are they moving through the emerging, evolving, embedding, excelling, matrices in the way that we'd like them to and if not, what's blocking that? And that's how we actually identified that we needed to introduce peer observation and coaching because we just kept getting stuck. And when we looked at what would move us to the next level, it was those elements. So that then informed our structures for the next year.

Ben: [10:14](#) What evidence do you now have that teaching practice has improved in your school?

Nicole: [10:19](#) So this year we introduced instructional rounds, which was a new concept for our staff. I think important to say too, that as a leader, and we might get to this a little bit later, but how do we get people to engage with these new resources and the strategies and tools? And part of that is around, you know, listening and engaging your staff, knowing your staff, and making things really relevant to them. So, in my experience as a teacher, always coming from the fact that I am a teacher, although I sit in the principal role, I'm a teacher at heart. What would be useful to me and things that I can take straight into my classroom and impact on my actual teaching and students is what's, what's profoundly important to me as a teacher. So, we introduced instructional rounds. The staff were involved in looking at the matrices. So, we actually developed a matrix around learning intentions and success criteria because we had a lot of staff saying setting goals, in the HITS was part of what they were wanting to focus on. So predominantly we looked at classroom environment and learning intentions and success criteria. And we actually took the focus away from the practice. We just wanted to see that they were up, that they were relevant, that they were in student friendly language. All of the things that we had ascertained, were highly effective practice around setting goals and that we weren't at this point looking at how is the teacher articulating it? Are the students, do they have access to it and what does that look like? So we did that as a leadership team in term one, put my hand up for our

community of practice as a network for this term, last term, sorry, time to where we've now got three schools coming out, teachers, principals and AP's from other schools coming out and going through our classrooms and actually looking at the practice. So, what that showed us was growth already between term one and term two with this structured approach. We're coming in to have a look at your environment and how these things are being communicated to students. And now we're actually coming in and having a look at how you're articulating them. Are you revisiting them? Are you doing some reflection with the students around them? And we're getting external people's opinion and perception around that. So that's been really important information for us, and the staff have embraced it.

We've also got things that we do within our PLT, which is self-assessment for teachers around, the hits. So, they do in term two, in term four. They will actually self-assess as a PLT and moderate around where they sit, think they're sitting on the Matrix, and provide evidence as to why I'm saying that. So, I think I'm here, but this is why. So that's, that's data as well. Our student data is challenging within specialists' settings. So, we don't do NAPLAN within a special developmental school. Some other specialist settings, you know, do have students that can sit standardized tests. We don't. So, student data is always a challenging space for us. But we do ABLES, we have a Victorian curriculum assessment tool and we have a reading assessment and many other forms of assessment that we use measuring student outcomes, for us, it's mainly around teacher judgment. Uh, and we do that through using the abilities-based learning and education support platform that the department also, offer us. And what that does is show, the teachers sit through a series of questions and they moderate that together and that's been a profoundly important part to getting consistent teacher judgment. So, within PLTs they moderate their ABLES assessments as well as the Victorian curriculum assessments and all other assessments that we do because we need to make sure that we're getting consistent judgement across the school because this also informs our individual learning plan goals. So, then what we do is we actually track, growth within level, across level, and across multiple levels as well as a decline in growth because we have many, many students now with an enrollment of complex physical and medical needs that might have long periods of absenteeism. So, there are some, competing factors

in terms of student growth. And what, what can assist that and also hinder that. So we take all of that into account, but what we do is then map that onto a spreadsheet so we can see that x amount of percentage of students have had growth within level, which is really important for us, because some of our students might sit within level for quite a number of years before they move on to say from A to level B. But it's important to celebrate the growth within level because that's growth. So, we're quite creative around it. We are at the moment working on a data wall, which is exciting. So the staff are talking, we've got a trial one up in our PLT room at the moment and the staff are working with whether that's, you know, how that can be really useful in a dynamic space for them to be developing their SMART goals and inquiries in their PLTs. So that's fairly new in a specialist setting or certainly this school as well, a data wall. So that's exciting. It is a challenge, but it's something that we continually push the envelope on. And we expect student growth.

Ben:

[15:01](#)

Being the, you're a leader in a special development school. Have you had to make any adaptations to the VTLM to suit your school's context?

Nicole:

[15:09](#)

There is no need to adapt the Victorian teaching and learning model to our context. We struggle around some of the, particularly around the HITS, say metacognitive strategies. That's something that requires a lot of unpacking with staff and a lot of work and thinking around what does that look like for our students. We've got, around 90% of my students are functionally nonverbal. So, we have one to one iPad with Prolo quo to go and we have students also using pod, and high contrast pods. So, communication is a huge area of focus in high school. And so therefore, what does student reflection and feedback look like when 90% of the students are functionally nonverbal? How do we understand thinking around our students and their metacognitive strategies that, that we're developing, and the students might be using when 90% of our students are functionally nonverbal? So, there's certainly areas that we need to be really creative with. How we actually generate those ideas with our students, how we support them around that. It certainly doesn't mean that we don't, we say they're, uh, irrelevant because we understand that all the evidence base, everything is relevant. It's about how are we creatively applying those strategies within our context for each

		<p>individual student. So that takes time and it takes unpacking and it takes professional learning and support. And I think with that acknowledgement as a leader that, you know, this is non-negotiable, this is effective practice and we do this and it's not irrelevant to us, but how do I support them and provide the structures and resourcing in order for the staff to feel like we can do this?</p>
Ben:	16:50	<p>So can you tell me what do you think the qualities of a great teacher are?</p>
Nicole:	16:55	<p>Oh, I think that's, that's a really good question. The qualities of a good teacher are first and foremost the capacity to build relationships with students, particularly in our context. So, relationships are so, so profoundly important. Knowledge of the students and how they learn. Absolutely important. Collaboration in the climate that we're in now. And I was a graduate teacher. We didn't have PLTs, we were in our classrooms. We didn't have, I didn't have a mentor. It was fend for yourself. We're now in a culture where collaboration is, is profoundly important and it's so, so valuable. So the capacity to understand that we don't know everything and the benefit of working with others means that we can just keep enriching our practice and that if we learn things that challenge what we're currently doing, it's not that we weren't doing the best that we could or the right thing, it was just that we know differently now. So, I think that growth mindset, a passion, your own learning to support the learning of your students' relationships. I think for, for new teachers or for any teacher, the element of organization and time management is really, really important. Being able to ask for help if you need it. And that's okay. Just being able to refine your craft. And I think being open to what the system has to offer in the school that you're working in has to support you with is I think one of the greatest strengths.</p>
Ben:	18:24	<p>W are the particular qualities that are needed by a teacher to work in a special development school?</p>
Nicole:	18:30	<p>So to work in a specialist setting, I think you need to love a challenge. And when I say challenge, I mean being able to be so versatile in your practice. And it doesn't mean that you have to be an experienced teacher, but you have to be very open to having a plan and having that plan change relatively quickly and being able to adapt and be flexible around that. Always with a</p>

focus on learning. I think you need to be open minded. You need to have that absolute focus on individual student learning. I think that you, you need a passion for, working with individual student's strengths and being able to be strengths focused so all students in our school can learn. You need to absolutely have that, that belief, that fundamental belief. So, I think a lot of being successful in a special school is having that belief. Having resilience. And I think this speaks to any, any school, really having resilience because sometimes, particularly as a new teacher, you're very clear about what you want to achieve in the day and sometimes you know, you deviate from that and that's okay but I think definitely resilience, knowing that all students can learn, understanding that you are one of the most important people in that child's educational journey and that every day you have to be your best and that what that looks like within our context is vastly different. But you're not immune from high expectations. You're not immune from evidence-based practice. You're not immune from the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model. All of those things are relevant. It's just how you differentiate those

Ben:

[20:08](#)

What advice would you give to a graduate teacher about looking for employment in a specialist's sitting?

Nicole:

[20:14](#)

What I would say to a graduate teacher looking for employment in a special setting is maybe go out and have a look at the school, before you consider, working in a specialist setting. Make sure it's the right fit for you and it's okay if it's not. So, I'll often say that when, if we're recruiting and we'll do a tour and I'll say to people, it's okay if this is not the right fit for you. So, get a little bit of an understanding of what the differences between mainstream and specialist education. Then I would say you really well supported. So, we have an amazing team. We have the capacity to resource, unlike our mainstream colleagues, which is, you know, I know challenging for them. But we have an allied health team. We have three speech pathologists, we have two occupational therapists, we have a physio therapist, we have our leadership team are all out of the classroom. We have a coaching model; we have our learning specialists in place. We have a really extensive induction program. So, in terms of the way we support all staff, this isn't isolated to graduates. I think we do that really, really well. Uh, I think there's an absolute joy in working in special education and diversifying your skillset to quite specific learning needs of

students. I think that also gives you a really good breadth in your toolkit. So even if it's just not a lifelong decision like mine it might be that you just want to give this a go. I would say don't be scared. Ask questions. So, if you're interested in it, ring up a school and ask about, talk to me about what's the difference. I actually support ANZUK and we, we run through each term for the last three terms, I've done a PD for them with all of their CRTs, just talking about what is the basics in special education needs. Just to try and get a breadth of, of staff wanting to give themselves the opportunity to, to experience special education. Because sometimes the hesitation is the not knowing, so pick up the phone, ask your local school, special school, what they're all about going and have a look and really give it a go.

Ben:

[22:24](#)

What do you think makes a great leader in an educational setting?

Nicole:

[22:28](#)

I think the qualities of a great leader in an education setting, fundamentally are about relationships. And part of that is about empathy. I think as a leader it's really important to remember that, you are a teacher and you worked in classrooms. And in my experience, I've been in education support worker as well and to always lead from that place of, of students first. And then what does this mean for my classrooms and for my teachers. So, I never wanted to be a principal or an assistant principal. I always wanted to be in a classroom. And now here I am, and I will often say to my staff, you know, the whole school is my classroom. This is how I reconcile not being in the classroom, I guess. If I can work and build the capacity of, of my workforce to impact on 170 students, then that's an amazing thing. And how do I go about that? And what are the skills that I think are important in that is relationships, knowing your staff, what their needs are, how they best receive feedback, and have been able to be an instructional leader and engage in the teaching and learning conversations with your staff. So being PLTs visit classrooms, be the person that they pick up the phone to and say, come down to my, and now this is happening. Can you help me out? Or come and say this, it's amazing. Be Accessible, be visible, know your community, have amazing partnerships with your parents, have amazing partnerships with your students. Be on the ground, you know, yes, there's the, you have to be on the balcony. That's part of leadership, but you also have to be on the dance floor and you have to be moving with your staff and hearing and feeling and experiencing

what they're experiencing and being, knowing when to take your foot off the pedal and, and really dictate deeply on something and then move on from that. So being understanding of where everyone in your community is at. Emotional intelligence is highly, highly important and self-management highly, highly important. And for some people that comes really naturally and for others that's a skill that they need to develop, and you can develop and learn those things. So, having good coaching and mentoring around you, having people that can support your leadership journey is important, but I think those two elements working in such a dynamic big community are fundamentally important in special education in my context with 90 staff. But in any context as a leader.

Ben: [24:39](#) if you could go back in time, what do you tell the 16 year old work experience version of yourself?

Nicole: [24:45](#) So I've principal made was to talk to 16 year old me. This is what I would say, these are my reflections. You've picked the right path. This is, you're gonna love every minute of this and I'll often say to staff, I never have a bad day. And they'll say, what do you mean by that? You know, how is that possible? And I say, there are moments that challenge me but in those moments is growth, whether it was in the classroom or whether it was in, in my principal role now and those moments never, ever supersede the day. To me. What I would say to myself is clarity brings the most amount of, I guess confidence and your beliefs and your values aligned with clarity as a leader just open up, I think such creativity and flexibility in the way you go about what you do. I would say to myself, wow, I never would have thought you would be here. And here I am. I would say it is the greatest gift, but it's also a big responsibility and the commitment to the community, is first and foremost. You know, my priority and that drives, you know, what I know is, is best for our students in terms of, their right to high expectations and high-quality teaching and learning absolutely drives everything that I do. And the culture and climate that you set as a leader, is so, so important. And their things, you know, at 16 years of age I've, I just thought, oh wow, I feel good about this and this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. And now, you know, I wouldn't have ever thought this is where I'd be sitting, but it's the greatest gift and it's the greatest joy.

Ben:	26:26	Can you talk about the importance of involving staff in conversations around FISO or the Framework to Improve Student Outcomes and the entire VTLM, creating perspective and empowerment in your teaching team?
Nicole:	26:39	<p>So one of the key drivers of the VTLM and also the education state is the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes, FISO. What has become profoundly evident to me and my role as acting principal for 15 months and now substantive principle for just on 12 months is sometimes stops, missed the connections. So, as leaders, how are we actually enabling our staff to connect to the bigger picture? How are we empowering them to take ownership over that and understand the decisions that we make as leaders because sometimes I think they just, decisions appear and staff do things, but they're not actually sure about the alignment. And so, with the introduction of FISO and the VTLM, what we've used that to do is actually create those connections. So starting from our AIP, having those three elements explicit in our AIP about the things we're working on and then we map that to a FISO board in our staff room so that staff see that our professional learning aligns to the goals that are evidenced in our AIP and our strategic plan. And we actually get to put a dot up. So, at the end of every presentation we take our dot and we say, you know, depends on who's presenting, and it could be today's presentation was brought to you by positive climate for learning. And we put the spot up, or it could be, you know, this explicitly links to this goal. This is about our GVC and we pop the spot up.</p> <p>So we were creating an evidence, a body of evidence as we go and we're explicitly saying to staff us standing in front of you or these consultant standing in front of you is strategic and directly connected to our school goals cause they are the drivers, our strategic plan and our AIP of the drivers and I think for too long in schools they've sat on a shelf and they haven't been used or connected being connected to the work of staff. So, we have this through line now from our PDPs, our AIP, our PD strat plan, AIP, PDPs, there's a through line and we now make that visible in all that we do with staff. We then have started to engage the staff in our self-assessment against the FISO continuum. And this is about empowering them, giving them the knowledge, that what does that, you know, how do we assess ourselves against that? What tells us that we're a highly effective school or not? So, they've, they've actually worked across a number of</p>

sessions looking at the continuum and that has been so enlightening for the staff. It's been, they've been so engaged, the richness of the communications and the conversations around, it's been amazing. We've had the question asked about, who normally does this, is this a leadership job? Cause this is, you know, this is a big task, but wow. So, they've actually done the assessment of the, of the continuum, FISO, the FISO continuum. and that's another connection, another point of connection. It's them owning then what we say in our review that we're good at and where we need to improve. So, empowerment of staff is profoundly important. Bringing the, the documents into the goal setting conversations, having the documents available in their PLTs. How are we constantly referencing, making connections to that. The booklet, the professional practice manual, they all got on day one, they bring that to staff meetings. So, we can cite in that in this booklet we're referring to page what have you. Empowering them to take ownership over the direction of the school and their contribution to it. And that has been a significant change that we've been able to implement so that all staff can talk about what our AIP is. They know what the goals are. They could prattle off half a dozen strategies that we've implemented because it's on our board. We've even had staff saying, where's the dot for this session? So, there's an investment there, which is fantastic. So empowering staff is so important and as leaders, that's our job to identify how we're going to best do that.

Ben:

[30:20](#)

And that's it for the graduate teacher learning series podcast. Thank you to our guests for sharing their experiences. And thank you for listening. We'll see you next time. Bye for now.