29th ACHPER International Conference

“Values into Action – A Brighter Future”

Post Conference Report

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When the Teachers Registration Board accepted my application to be part of the 29th ACHPER International Conference, I was delighted. As a specialist Physical Education teacher for close to half of my career, I have fond memories of State ACHPER conferences, where I always came away having learnt lots of new things and possibly even the affirmation that I was doing lots of things right. This conference was certainly no exception and I found myself jumping into term 2 with a renewed sense of optimism and vigour (two things that had been a bit lacking for me, by the end of term 1), thanks to the amazing and varied workshops that I attended over the three days of this exceptional conference.

The theme of this year's conference was ‘Values into Action – A Brighter Future,’ and what an apt theme indeed. Some of the data surrounding the state of health and wellbeing in Australia, across our entire population, is quite alarming. One of the keynote speakers mentioned that Australian maximum-security prisoners are getting more daily physical activity than many of our school-aged children, highlighting an issue that many of us are aware of, but may often be too busy to deal with. The conference raised and discussed many of the issues that I hear staff in my site and partnership discussing, around the increasing wellbeing issues that we find ourselves dealing with, decreased student engagement, decreasing academic results and other issues that are contributing to a future, for an increasing number of our students that is potentially less than bright. In an effort to start making a positive change at a class and hopefully school level at least, I attended as broad a range of sessions as I could, from game-based and active sessions, to hands-on maths and technology, through to more traditional lecture based sessions. I have learned lots of new things and reaffirmed or sharpened up my thinking around many other issues and ideas, and have already tried a few out in my Yr. 6/7 classroom, with some pleasing success after only one week.

From the ‘Welcome to Country,’ first thing Monday morning, by the incredibly talented Jack Buckskin, through to my final session on the Wednesday, that had me jumping into my own “personal bubble of awesomeness”(and feeling a bit self conscious,) I enjoyed every minute. I had interesting, challenging and enlightening conversations with colleagues from other parts of Australia and around the world. The keynotes were largely very engaging and really challenged me to reflect on my current practice and make some immediate changes. I also enjoyed hearing about what other sites or organisations are having success with now, and the journeys they have undertaken, the challenges they have faced and the positive results they are seeing and sharing. It made me feel enthusiastic about getting back to school, sharing my conference learning with staff at my site and others in our partnership, as well as teaching-friends and colleagues across the state. Maybe the conversations we have will be the small ripple that it takes to create an eventual steady, flow-on effect toward making some really positive changes.

Particular highlights for me were everywhere over the three days. My first highlight was listening to Jack, teaching us about Kaurna language and the Welcome to Country. Conference delegates were still talking about how amazing it was at the closing session! I madly jotted notes in the hope that my school may be able to get him to come and spend some time with us, sharing his incredible knowledge and helping us to better understand each other's cultures. I have never taken notes so early in a conference before!
Keynote speaker, Professor Jo Salmon was fascinating. Last term I removed much of the traditional furniture from my small, 60’s-style, square-box of a classroom, in the vain hope of making it a less boring place to be and engaging my students with a more welcoming and familiar environment. While it caused a few challenging behaviours with some students, I enjoyed having a more flexible space, allowing students to move around, to break up their sitting and to add some activity to their day. It seems I was onto something and I have taken Professor Salmon’s advice and incorporated at least a 30 minute standing lesson into every day, as well as standing breaks and a standing area for learning, which is the new favourite option of many of my students. I have spoken to my class about the slogan presented in this session, that ‘sitting is the new smoking,’ and many of them have really seemed to take it onboard with my 5 standing/balance cushions being the new learning space of choice – silent reading turns a few heads with people walking past now! I shared these simple ideas at last week’s staff meeting and then stood up at the back of the room for a while, and was pleased to see lots of smiles, some grateful faces and several people happily joined me. I have made my classroom available to all staff to observe or borrow equipment from, and already some are very interested in the standing, balance cushions. I particularly liked the research that Professor Salmon shared, stating that students with increased levels of physical activity have better learning outcomes, summed up by her comment that “the more they burn, the more they learn.”

Professor David Walsh gave a very insightful presentation on “Promoting Values with Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility.” So much of what we do centres around explicitly teaching values. It is hugely important and a cornerstone of all the teaching and learning in my classroom. His step-by-step model from his own challenging daily practice was really valuable and showed me a more formal way of managing what I already try to do.

I thoroughly enjoyed the creative dance workshop, which was packed full of immediately useful teaching strategies and ideas, as well as the music and steps to use. I am now trying to will myself to try it, knowing what many in my class are going to say! I am currently in negotiations with another teacher who often shares PE lessons with me – he is adamant he is not teaching creative dance and we both know we have to, so we are coming up with a way of sharing the load and playing to our strengths - collaborating to make the curriculum load easier to manage!

I gained much from the “Wellbeing Classroom” session, where I was expecting to find out how to improve student wellbeing, and was pleasantly surprised to find the key messages all centred around the teacher - because only 'well teachers make for well students,' which makes perfect sense. I loved Daniella’s simple and immediate ideas for changing a gloomy negative perspective into a positive healthy one. I have shared many of these in passing conversations with staff and with my family. I particularly loved her 2 graphs of success as shown below – so true!

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What People Think Success Looks Like

What Success Really Looks Like!
Much of the reason that I wanted to attend this conference was to do with getting more familiar with the Australian Curriculum and learning to use it more efficiently and effectively. I was surprised to find Rob Randall’s presentation, as part of the day two keynote session, a gentle challenge, rather than the information overload I was dreading. I liked the idea that the Australian Curriculum should really be an affirmation of what we already do, and that we should keep asking questions - look for what we aren’t doing and ask ourselves why? Rob encouraged us all to use these “whys” as opportunities to reflect on and improve what we are doing. I went to a follow-up session straight after this with Tracy Zilm from ACARA, and she gave us some practical resources and starting points to take back, use and share within our sites. Her A3 “Curriculum on a Page” for Reception to Year 6 was particularly good and I think will be very well received by staff as an aid to engaging more successfully with the new curriculum. I enjoyed meeting delegates from Queensland in this session who actually take this curriculum and create aligned units of work. I am quite keen to have a look at their work on Scootle, but unfortunately, at this stage it is unavailable to SA users. It would be really great if these sorts of resources could be shared Australia wide, to help teachers around the country share their thinking and ideas and really make sure we are all delivering similar concepts to our students - and to help us all create a little more work-life balance!

I really enjoyed engaging with the “Nature Play” presentation, which some staff at school were already finding out about. Griffin Longley from Nature Play WA, was an excellent presenter, clearly knowledgeable and passionate about what he does. I loved his notion of the importance of kids just having time to ‘muck around outside’ as I have such fond memories of doing exactly that as a child, and I try to make sure my own children also have a love of it too. He advocated finding ways to embrace technology, even though 71% of our boys and 75% of our girls are exceeding the maximum recommended daily screen time, as we cannot defeat it, it is too powerful and we just have to learn to work with it. He told us about the Nature Play Passport and Apps to get kids using technology while they are being active and highlighted the Nature Play website, all of which were fantastic. The idea of offering something that doesn’t cost a lot and that gets children outside and actively using their imaginations and actually communicating directly to one another in real time, not over the internet, gaming or on social media, is very dear to my heart! I worry about what has happened to the natural, playful inquisitiveness of children, and I dread reading the written work of many students now as it so clearly lacks imagination. The evidence of imaginations being reignited gave me hope and I am really keen to have a go at this at school.

I have take Griffin’s advice of using technology as an ally, and I have stretched my mind and extended my technology skills to playing around with QR Codes. I did have to look up what they were when I saw the session in the program, as I had no idea what they were. They are simple to work with and the possibilities are endless and so far my class has found them highly engaging.

At this stage I have briefly spoken at last week’s staff meeting, about what I learned at the conference, and have arranged with our leadership team to share some ideas at a number of upcoming staff meetings. I plan to negotiate sharing relevant information with our school community via our newsletter and possibly our Facebook page – maybe even using the QR Codes I have been playing with! I have spoken to some parents already about some of the interesting things I have been learning about and hope to keep sharing as opportunities arise face to face or over the phone. Last week, I team-taught with another teacher, sharing and modeling ideas from the Maths ‘n’ Movement program and had numerous professional discussions with members of staff who are interested in trying some of the things I have shared so far. I am attending a meeting with other Yr. 6/7 teachers in our partnership this week, where we are discussing and sharing ideas about how we try to fit things into the
diverse and very crowded curriculum, and I intend to share lots of insights – maybe we can form an online group to share ideas, relevant research, useful web links, etc. I am happy to model lessons for teachers, or work on developing ideas and strategies as part of a dedicated, specific learning team, maybe in conjunction with priorities identified on our Site Learning Plan. I have shared useful links and possible resources with our principal and our PE teacher, as well as other staff, and I intend to follow up on lots of the web references, readings, books and research that was highlighted by presenters over the three days. Perhaps most importantly I have already begun to implement new ideas and strategies into my daily teaching, where the changes can be seen immediately with some things, and hopefully tracked over time with positive changes noted in the long term. Once I have had time to let things settle down and get some of the new things I want to implement up and running smoothly, I hope to gather some sort of data or evidence on whether what I do makes a difference.

I would like to thank the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia, for affording me the opportunity to attend the 29th International ACHPER Conference. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and certainly gained highly relevant and exciting knowledge and skills. I had access to some incredible people doing amazing things in their fields and I believe I have benefited greatly from this experience. I hope that the TRB is able to continue this sort of sponsorship, working with educators around South Australia to further their professional development and help strengthen education in SA.