Unlocking Potential: Principal Preparation
In 2010, Frank Vetere was appointed Assistant Principal at the newly established Point Cook College. Being involved from day one meant that Frank was able to play a key role in developing a clear vision and strategy for the school.

‘It was a very exciting opportunity, and I was able to put all my years of experience into the role – right back from the very first school I taught at – and I became really engaged,’ says Frank.

Despite his success in this leadership position and his aspirations to become a principal, Frank felt he needed to learn more about what principalship involved before he could take the next step in his career. To make this possible, he applied for Bastow’s flagship principal preparation program, UP: Unlocking Potential, in 2014.

From the first day of the program, Frank was completely re-engaged in learning and began to really see himself as a principal. The rigorous academic approach of the UP program required Frank to deeply analyse and understand contemporary evidence-based research and different theories around education and leadership, and then to work out how this learning could inform and make a positive impact on classroom practice.

‘I also realised that building relationships and shaping the future are crucial elements of the work of a principal, and that it is essential to have a really good understanding of what these are,’ says Frank.

Frank also developed an acute awareness of the ‘flow-on effect’ that the principal has on the school community, right down to the students, and the importance of emotional intelligence.

‘And this awareness and intelligence is not necessarily something that is innate, you have to learn and develop it, and it’s hard work.’

When he was appointed Acting Principal at the end of 2014, Frank was able to directly apply his Bastow learning to develop a realistic whole-school strategic plan and a leadership model with clear, integrated accountabilities and targets.

‘My approach is centred on having a vision and a purpose for education at the college that is based on sound theoretical foundations and quality evidence,’ explains Frank. ‘And then to make sure I can articulate the vision and provide a story around it.’

As well as valuable mentoring by the outgoing principal, Frank had the support of his colleague Jeff Wilson, a leading teacher and literacy coach with a strong academic and research background, to help him develop his vision and plan and then to clearly and confidently communicate it to the staff.

‘The way that Frank communicated the plan was with passion. You could really get a sense of the enthusiasm and drive behind it,’ says Jeff.

Frank also began to understand the importance of being a highly visible and engaged leader and the impact and influence this has on staff, student and parent perception of the school and of him as a leader.
‘It makes it clear that I am a real person who is involved, energetic, committed and leading the way forward.’

Supporting other potential leaders in the school to grow and build on their leadership is also a priority for Frank. Jeff describes this approach as really giving people ‘a chance to shine and show their potential’, as well as feel significantly challenged.

‘And this is really what you want among aspirational leaders – for them to have an exciting challenge ahead of them,’ says Jeff.

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Witnessing the transformation

From the moment he started the Bastow UP Program in early 2014, Frank’s colleagues noticed his renewed energy towards his role. They commented on his positivity, research knowledge, language around leadership development and general attitude.

‘All of a sudden I became really engaged and it became palpable in my school. It was contagious. People I was working with couldn’t believe the transformation,’ says Frank.

Jeff watched Frank transition from Assistant Principal to Principal and witnessed first-hand the impact that Frank’s professional learning has had on the school.

‘He looks and sounds more like a leader,’ says Jeff. ‘I really feel that he has a clear sense of a framework for his own way of leading. He has really strongly reflected on the kind of leader he wants to be.’

Transitioning into the Principal position while participating in the Bastow program and in the midst of the school review, made it perfect timing for Frank and Jeff to deepen their professional relationship and for Frank to articulate an ongoing vision for the school.

‘As time went on, our ethos, our meta-language for talking about teaching, learning and curriculum merged into one of similarity, which just meant that it opened up really strong communication,’ says Jeff.

This self-reflection has also enabled Frank to develop a clear sense of himself as leader and the powerful impact he has on the whole school community.

‘I sometimes feel a little like a rock star in the school and it’s just because I’m really excited. I’m really excited about learning and teaching, I’m excited about students. And I do remember from when I was at school and also with my own kids, just how important the principal is.’

A true professional learning team

A key part of Frank’s leadership focus and approach is developing a structure where teachers are able to grow, where they are empowered and challenged, but are also part of a team with a shared vision.

‘[Forming a leadership team] has been a big shift in our school, but we now have this protected time together,’ explains Frank. ‘And from this, the team is developing their own narrative around their leadership.’

The purpose of the team is not so much about discussing curriculum content, but rather offering staff the time to read and analyse research, as well as a valuable opportunity to reflect on their own leadership and learn from each other.

‘The questions are very much, ‘How are you going in your leadership? Can you show us what you’re working on?’ What we have developed is a mini team of leaders who are learning from each other,’ says Frank.

For Jeff, Frank’s role as a moderator is crucial to this process. It provides direction and focus and, more importantly, creates a structure within the school that supports this process.

‘He completely restructured our leadership group, which took a lot of planning,’ says Jeff. ‘He worked very hard with the other assistant principals to get buy-in from that group. And he then articulated it to the principal and connected it with our strategic plan, so it felt like a system.’

Frank’s confidence and assurance about the plan meant that there was clarity around all the roles and responsibilities, and a sense that he was genuinely inviting people in on the vision.

‘This provided a solid foundation,’ explains Jeff. ‘The leadership team have a model they are working with and which we have decided on as a whole school.’

And this is what Frank believes is the basis for a ‘true professional learning team’.

‘The approach meant that teachers’ perception and approach to their work had to change,’ says Frank. ‘They’re asked to drill deep, and they’re asked to because if they keep doing what they have always been doing, then they’re going to get the same result.’

Each member then has to lead their own team in a way that allows individual teachers to work on their own professional learning and then this is implemented in the classroom.

‘So it’s a complete cycle – what happens in the leadership team transfers right through to what happens in the classroom, and then the real impact occurs when students that can also articulate what this means.’
'The approach meant that teachers’ perception and approach to their work had to change.'
For Frank, the Bastow UP program helped him to develop a language around learning and teaching, but more importantly, a language around leadership. And he considers this his biggest learning.

‘I learnt that I am not the expert of everything. I am continually learning and the world is continually changing and evolving. But what I am really developing and getting good at is leading and understanding good practice, and understanding how people grow and connect and relate to each other.’

Jeff also considers Frank’s belief in his vision and ability to communicate it as the most outstanding aspects of Frank’s growth as a leader.

‘Frank really inspires confidence and trust because he now has a framework for leadership and this is based around the set of themes that we used at Bastow. But what is really helpful for me, is that he has developed a discourse for leadership.’

For Frank this discourse, or narrative as he refers to it, really exemplifies to staff, students and families that he is a real person and is excited about learning and teaching, as well as a leader.

Jeff also believes that the program’s focus on developing emotional intelligence has been vital in the way Frank has framed his vision and then in turn, the impact this has had on the staff, students and school community.

‘Bastow makes it clear that you can learn emotional intelligence and that this is how we get that trust confidence happening,’ says Jeff. ‘It’s not always about the data and the pedagogy, leadership has social complexities.’

He also sees this emotional awareness translating into the way that principals generally conduct themselves.

‘Strong leadership is highly symbolic,’ says Jeff. ‘If a community sees the principal as an ethical human being, symbolically that’s really strong. And it does trickle down, and it’s this leading by example that is really potent.’

What it comes down to, according to both Jeff and Frank, is that when a learning culture is led by an engaged, strong, accountable and emotionally aware leader then students are able to become effective, enthusiastic and independent learners.

And it is this growth mindset that has taken the school beyond just dealing with ‘grade level standards’.

‘Rather, we’re talking more about customised curriculum and growing every student in the best way we can,’ says Jeff.