

# Village Schools' Philosophy 2.0

## Context

Today seems like an appropriate day to be drafting a revision of the Village Schools' philosophy. Ten years after the first version was put into action, we are both wiser, the vision clearer, and the world is so different to when we started. We now have a better sense of how much our schools have to contribute to the lives of the people who spend time at them, and how this may ripple out into the world in which we find ourselves. We see the importance of providing schools, workplaces and communities which support vibrant, healthy, conscious human beings to know themselves, engage well with others, and to really appreciate the world around them.

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## Introduction

This document outlines the founding principles of each of the Village Schools (Koonwarra Village School est. 2012, Phillip Island Village School est. 2016, and Village High School est. 2020). The way in which each of these schools expresses the values and principles of this philosophy will reflect their age, community and location. Whilst the school's programs may vary, they will all link back to this philosophy, which is a deliberate and purposeful response to what we (the school's founders) want to contribute to the world at this time.

Our holistic approach to education is inspired by the work of many educational and big picture thinkers. This philosophy sees us as unique and separate individuals and, at the same time, as the expression of a life force that is continuously connected and interdependent. In much the same way that a wave momentarily separates itself from the ocean, we too, momentarily express ourselves in a unique human form. Village Schools are environments in which each member of the community aligns themselves with a trajectory for self-actualisation. By working towards this for ourselves, we simultaneously contribute to the growth of others, and ultimately to the evolution of all life.

In this quest, we feel our efforts are best focussed on two key areas – individuation and connection, both being fundamental aspects of a human experience, and key requirements for a self-actualisation trajectory. These two areas form a dual lens through which we successfully navigate the externally imposed bureaucratic requirements by integrating them with our own curriculum and method of delivery. Individuation and connection reflect a long term, hopeful vision that believes in the capacity of each person to experience a life that is joyous and fulfilling, through connection with themselves, others and our earth

In the first iteration of our philosophy, we described the path to self-actualisation as one that 'uncovers our identity and the meaning and purpose of our lives'. With the hundreds of children and adults we have encountered during the last ten years, we now see that much of the identity that emerges during childhood is unnecessarily covered over by many of our experiences at schools, in families, and by society in general. At Village Schools we have an opportunity to interrupt some of those pattern-forming experiences so that as adults, our students will be significantly closer to being able to realise their full potential. Our work involves a long-term vision, and an understanding that 'being human' involves a journey of self-discovery throughout one's lifetime.

We aim to provide educational experiences that do not need to be 'unpacked' later in life, that contribute to, and enhance self-awareness, as opposed to hindering it.

## Self-Actualisation

For thousands of years, the concept of self-actualisation appears across cultures, within spiritual traditions, and as part of psychological frameworks. This specific term came to prominence in the 1950s through the work of humanistic psychologist Dr Abraham Maslow who felt that in a natural, healthy state, all people are drawn towards achieving their potential. It sounds simple enough, yet we look around and see how few people have been able to achieve this elusive goal.

In recent times, schools have been given the responsibility of ensuring children achieve their potential in relation to skills and knowledge, while social and other higher order potentials are in the realm of families and religious institutions. Children regularly experience a top-down approach, where the content and instruction are pre-determined in a one size fits all program. We work with a different framework, which sees and values each child in their unique expression of humanity and asks, 'who are you, what would you like to know'? We work this way with the intention of keeping children free to discover for themselves who they are and how they would like to be in the world, as they journey towards expressing their potential.

Here are some of the characteristics you could expect to see in a self-actualising person:

- motivation by a strong sense of personal ethics and responsibility. They enjoy solving real-world problems and are often concerned with helping other people improve their own lives;
- value their privacy and enjoy solitude. While they also love the company of others, taking time to themselves is essential for personal discovery and cultivating their potential;
- do not conform to other people's ideas of happiness or contentment. This original perspective allows the individual to live in the moment and appreciate the beauty of each experience;
- display a thoughtful sense of humour. They are able to enjoy the humour in situations and laugh at themselves, but they do not ridicule or make fun at the expense of others
- accept themselves and others as they are. They tend to lack inhibition and are able to enjoy themselves and their lives free of guilt. Other people are treated the same regardless of background, status or other socio-cultural factors.
- they have a few close intimate friends rather than many surface relationships;
- they have a tendency to be open, unconventional and spontaneous. While these people are able to follow generally accepted social expectations, they do not feel confined by these norms in their thoughts or behaviours;
- excited and interested in everything, even ordinary things;
- creative, inventive and original;
- are able to experience 'flow' when they are engaged with things that are meaningful to them. 'Flow' is when you are so deeply immersed in an activity that you lose track of time, when all thoughts and inspiration about the activity come together in that moment, when there is a perfect melding between the activity and your higher purpose.

The potential for self-actualisation is within us all. We make this a focus for our schools because moving towards the expression of our full potential profoundly and positively influences the quality of our lives and directly impacts on our capacity to contribute to others and the world around us.

## What Holds us Back?

If the outcome of achieving our potential is so desirable, what holds so many of us back? Why is such a straightforward notion so difficult to achieve? We believe this is not so much due to the lack of opportunities that we are presented with but due to some key factors that block our progress.

1. *Inspiration from unhelpful places* – modern culture is driven mostly by image and consumerism. Focusing on the values of popular culture creates a range of influences which can scramble our moral compass and take us way off our self-actualisation course.
2. *Playing it safe* – most people have a limited vision of what is possible for themselves and will express their lives through a fairly narrow band of options. Sticking closely to society's version of 'acceptable' often feels like the safest, and therefore most desirable option.
3. *Our stories* – whether these come from other people or ourselves, we tend to accumulate negative stories about ourselves during our childhood which can be hard to shake. They are always self-limiting.

Village Schools provide an environment to grow and learn that limits the impact of these inhibitors to self-actualisation. Our staff are all aligned with the purpose and values of the school and model many of the characteristics of self-actualising people. They are responsive to the feelings and needs of their students and prepare programs and experiences that reflect their interests.

Village Schools consciously choose not to be conduits for social and cultural programming. We do not foster social hierarchies or project status onto select members of our communities. We do not roll out off-the-shelf social or morally instructive programs, or engage in religious, nationalistic, or overly commercial cultural activities, such as Mother's Day. We respect the rights of families to make choices for themselves about which cultural events are meaningful for them without conferring tacit approval for a select few.

## Individuation and Connection

At Village Schools, we focus on two important aspects of the human experience – individuation and connection. Recent times have brought into sharp focus the extent to which our freedom and autonomy, aspects of individuation, can be restricted by external circumstances and entities, while a sense of connection with ourselves and others has been useful in mitigating the psychological burden that these restrictions impose.

Autonomy is an innate human desire which provides a sense of control over our lives. When we attune our need for autonomy with a personally calibrated moral compass, we become empowered to make choices which promote a sense of freedom for ourselves and contribute to the good of others. Our choices may be visible through our actions or held internally through our thoughts and mindset. When we realise the link between our choices and our sense of freedom, we become more able to protect the happiness and meaning in our lives from the turbulence of the world around us. This helps us understand that the freedom is an internal state, and one that cannot be taken away

by external events, even though the external context may dictate the range of choices that are available.

As we take a closer look at the key aspects of our school culture that are interwoven with individuation and connection we will see:

- *Connection with self* – social and emotional skills to understand and know ourselves, understand and experience personal autonomy, and know how to make decisions that are good for us;
- *Connection with others* – communicate effectively with others, develop empathy, and use both skills to make choices that are good for those around us.
- *Connection with our world* – experience the world around us with all of our senses and develop a deep appreciation of our place within it, and our role in contributing to balanced environmental systems

## Connection with Self

No matter how far each student progresses in their lives in relation to self-actualisation, a good connection with self is fundamental for a happy life. There are specific skills that have been identified as central to social and emotional awareness. These are the ones that relate to our connection with self:

- *Self-awareness*—accurately assessing one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence; understanding and articulating one’s personal boundaries in terms of physical, social, emotional safety.
- *Self-management*—regulating one’s emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately.
- *Responsible decision-making for ourselves* — making decisions based on consideration of one’s own feelings and needs, externally imposed rules, ethical standards, safety concerns, relevant social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to our own well-being, being mindful of the impact on others.

Social and emotional skills are learned through interaction with and observation of the people around us. Through personal experience and guidance from others we develop an emotional framework through which we attempt to meet our needs, and in time, the needs of others.

Authentic, personal autonomy involves making thoughtful, informed and uncoerced decisions about things that directly impact our lives. They may be visible to others through our actions, or they may remain internal decisions which involves our thoughts or mindset.

A key strategy of the Village School approach is to provide ongoing opportunities for students to exercise personal autonomy in relation to their learning. Within the structure of each day there is space and time for students to make choices about which classes to take or projects to investigate, when to study and when to take a break, when to seek the company of others and when to take time in solitude. Becoming good at evaluating choices and making decisions takes practise and

needs space to explore and learn, and the first choice is choosing to be at school, and acknowledging and understanding the context in which we are operating.

## Connection with Others

Seeking the company of others is an innate aspect of being human. To authentically experience a connection with others, you can't go past spending 200 days a year with fifty or so Village School community members. It is an intense, rich, pleasurable, exhausting experience, and the most fertile ground you would ever need for learning to connect with others.

Here are the skills we need to know to work successfully together:

- *Social awareness*—being able to take the perspective of and empathise with others; being able to actively listen and respond to verbal and non-verbal communication; recognising and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; recognising and using family, school, and community resources.
- *Relationship skills*—establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed.
- *Responsible decision-making within a group*—making decisions based on consideration of the needs of the group, externally imposed rules, ethical standards, safety concerns, relevant social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to the well-being of one's school and community.

Autonomy within a group is a more nuanced affair than making decisions just for ourselves, as it includes more elements to consider. Being part of a Village School community provides ongoing opportunities to get a feel for how to balance a group's needs with our own, and how to respond to the choices of others when they differ from ours.

The key to experiencing autonomy within a group is feedback. Being willing to give feedback on the choices of others when you feel it could benefit the group is both important and necessary to maintain the balance and perspective of the group. Being able to do this in a compassionate way and without judgement takes time and practise to learn. In sharing our thoughts, we learn to express our vulnerability which in turn helps others to know who we are, what we need and how they can contribute to our community.

As the receiver of feedback, it is our role to gracefully accept / reject / take time to consider what we have heard and adjust / choose the same / make another choice from there. This is a process that takes time and requires a culture of curiosity, empathy and openness.

## Connection with our World

We are starting to see the very real consequences of neglecting our connection with the natural world. Our society's insatiable appetite for continuous economic growth and our ever-increasing lifestyle expectations has blinded us to the understanding that our species survival is inextricably linked with the health of other life systems on our planet. Without clean water, fertile soil, a biodiversity of plants and animals, stable weather patterns, and equitable sharing of resources amongst the people of the world, the continuation of life as we know it is at risk. We each have a responsibility to consider how our values and choices contribute to the disruption or re-balancing of our natural systems – both locally and globally.

As our modern lives become busier and more 'virtual', we risk losing our connection with, and appreciation for, the very things that sustain us. We need to continue to have real experiences in, and of nature, that engage all our senses, so that we can know, in the ultimate sense, that this world is our home and our source of life. Virtual experiences can never be a true substitute for the evolutionary information that we carry in every cell of our bodies – the awe and wonder of life itself.

Within the Village School communities, we foster a deep understanding of, and respect for, our natural environment and its resources. Sustainability and minimum impact are our vision, and this guides the 'how' as well as the 'what' of many of our programs and activities. We also look to be active contributors to maintaining and restoring our environment, understanding the balance of giving and receiving in the natural system.