SHARPENING FOCUS – DISCOVERING BRILLIANCE

WHO ARE HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS?
Discover and understand their needs and hear what matters to them.
ABOUT AISNSW

The Association of Independent Schools of NSW is the peak body supporting and representing independent education, specifically independent schools, through offering services in:

- advice and consultancy
- professional learning
- funded programs and projects
- support for students with diverse needs
- research and data
- advocacy and partnerships.

We also work with governments, statutory authorities and a wide range of other educational stakeholders on behalf of over 480 independent schools, their boards, their principals and heads, their executive, their teachers and support staff. These schools educate over 200,000 children from the increasing number of families choosing independent education.

With the core values of integrity, professionalism, respect and collegiality AISNSW seeks to further the ideals of independent education: choice, diversity, quality, opportunity and excellence.

ABOUT THE AISNSW SCHOOL INNOVATION DIVISION

The School Innovation Division is a future-focused project team formed at a time of considerable interest in reshaping schooling. School Innovation coaches provide extended support in disciplined innovation, including design thinking. The team supports educators as they use processes such as ideation and prototyping, and focus on the enabling conditions required to lead significant change. Disciplined innovation suits schools that are seeking to explore new solutions to complex challenges in their distinctive context.

ELEVATE: agile design for high potential learners is the signature initiative of the team and is amplified by a strategic partnership with the Innovation Unit. ELEVATE is the first large scale community of practice using disciplined innovation methods provided by AISNSW and is inclusive of government and Catholic system schools and interstate independent schools. Funding for this program was provided by the Australian Government Students First Support Fund and AISNSW.

ABOUT OUR STRATEGIC PARTNER

Innovation Unit is a not-for-profit social enterprise supporting governments, organisations and communities to co-design, develop and implement at scale innovative solutions to pressing social, educational and health issues: solutions which deliver significantly better outcomes, often for significantly lower costs. It draws on the expertise of its practitioners, designers and researchers in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States and globally to work in partnership with clients from the public, private, and third sectors.
# CONTENTS

3  FOREWORD
4  ELEVATE: AGILE DESIGN FOR HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS
6  SHARPENING FOCUS – DISCOVERING BRILLIANCE
6  WHO ARE OUR HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS?
7  LEARNER PROFILES: USING ETHNOGRAPHY IN A DESIGN THINKING APPROACH
8  MEET MILLY AND JACOB
10  WHAT MATTERS TO HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS?
11  ELEVATE LEARNER INSIGHTS
13  IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS WHEN DESIGNING NEW SOLUTIONS
15  SEEKING POINTS OF DYNAMIC TENSION
16  FROM LEARNER INSIGHTS TO DESIGN BRIEF
17  12 PREVAILING THEMES
18  IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS
19  MEET MORE HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS
19  SPARKING POSSIBILITIES CARDS
19  SPARKING CONVERSATIONS
20  ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The Association of Independent Schools of NSW (AISNSW) is pleased to present the ELEVATE INSIGHTS Series which shares and celebrates the valuable learnings from our work with a diverse group of outstanding educators from all school sectors across the nation as they transformed learning experiences for Australia’s most able students.

From 2015 through to 2018, AISNSW was in the unique position of being able to offer ELEVATE: Agile design for high potential learners – a multi-year program designed to advance the national conversation around how best to identify and challenge high potential learners, and how to design and implement practices to address the needs of such learners, including gifted students, now and into the future.

The ELEVATE INSIGHTS Series is an invitation to all educators to engage with the lessons learnt from ELEVATE. It offers insights into the strongest themes that emerged from the work of the school teams and we hope it stimulates and enriches professional conversation and action across even more schools.

The ELEVATE INSIGHTS publications are connected and document participants’ insights and learnings. Accompanying each publication are complementary professional learning resources created during the project that will help inspire the possibilities that exist for others.

Unleashing Brilliance

HOW HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS ARE CHALLENGED AND SUPPORTED AROUND THE WORLD

◆ Our Case for Change
◆ A horizon scan

Sharpening Focus – Discovering Brilliance

WHO ARE HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS?

◆ Discover and understand their needs and hear what matters to them

Innovating and Leading for Brilliance

HOW SCHOOLS RESPONDED TO THE COMPLEX CHALLENGE OF MEETING THE NEEDS OF HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS

◆ Hear their insights and understand their journeys of innovation

We hope that by sharing the process and collective learnings from ELEVATE you will be inspired to imagine new possibilities for high potential learners in your own school, and feel supported in your own efforts to innovate for the future.

Dr Geoff Newcombe AM
Chief Executive, AISNSW
ELEVATE: agile design for high potential learners

DISCIPLINED INNOVATION PROCESS: AN INTRODUCTION

ELEVATE was a multiyear initiative working with Australian schools that explicitly focused on identifying and realising the high potential in learners, with a focus on the collaborative development of robust new teaching practices and providing real-world learning opportunities. Using a disciplined innovation approach, schools were empowered to explore their context and create agile learning environments that focused on deepening and extending their students’ abilities and achievements in academic areas and beyond.

The design of the program incorporated three core components:
- To **elevate** the learning opportunities for high potential learners and unleash their potential;
- To **collaborate** as a profession and use collective wisdom to design practices and models that have an impact;
- To **innovate** ‘next practices’ using disciplined innovation methods.

The design process was underpinned by three key models:
- the ‘nested communities of professional practice’ model;
- the ‘triple-diamond disciplined innovation’ model; and
- the ‘three fields of knowledge’ model.

The ELEVATE Nested Communities Model

Complex challenges are rarely solved by a single person or a single insight. They often require collaboration to bring together different perspectives and expertise from across various contexts. ELEVATE harnessed collective wisdom across a nested communities model. Application to be part of one of the three Communities of Practice was by competitive application process and offered successful schools a robust innovation process to redesign practice for high potential learners. ELEVATE provided a facilitated network and community of supporters with the shared ambition to design and scale future focused innovations to better meet the needs of high potential learners.
The Disciplined Innovation Model

Innovation is a disciplined method of leading and designing change. Throughout ELEVATE the 40 Community of Practice schools used the triple diamond disciplined innovation model to provide a robust process to stimulate, incubate and scale new solutions. It embraced multiple design tools to guide divergent and convergent thinking and keep the learner perspective central throughout.

The Three Fields of Knowledge Model

This model honours both the best of what is known from research and what we know as professionals within a specific context leading to the new knowledge we can create together.

The three fields of knowledge framed our innovation work as we used robust design thinking, methods and processes to support teams to combine ‘public’ knowledge – the research and evidence base – with ‘practitioner’ knowledge – the experience of school leaders and teachers – to create, test, refine and implement new and more rigorous learner and teaching practices.

This publication, Sharpening Focus – Discovering Brilliance, is the second publication in the ELEVATE Insights Series and focuses on learners. This publication, along with the first publication Unleashing Brilliance, has a focus on learning from, and for, the stimulate phase of the triple diamond innovation model.

The final publication Innovating and Leading for Brilliance provides greater detail on the entire disciplined innovation process and further programmatic learnings.
Sharpening Focus - Discovering Brilliance is a celebration of the unique and specific voices of more than 200 high potential learners in Australian classrooms today along with the insights of school leaders from their 40 schools. These learners are children of the 21st Century and their world has been framed by a digital and rapidly changing age. The educators within the ELEVATE Communities of Practice recognise the school experience for these learners sits on the cusp of significant global changes. It is influenced simultaneously by old and new structures but their futures clearly belong to a new, emerging age.

We share our synthesis of the learning insights as recognition of the collective wisdom of the school teams within and across three cohorts over three and a half years. We hope that by sharing both our process and what learners told us matters for their learning, you will be inspired to sharpen your focus and discover the brilliance of the learners in your own context.

WHO ARE OUR HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS?

Robust innovation encompasses an exploration of the needs of the people for whom any new solution or service is being created. It is through a process of developing empathy for high potential learners and a curiosity about their perspectives on life and learning that school teams developed insights to inform and sustain their innovation effort.

The ELEVATE program clearly identified the priority of getting to know the learners before designing responses to their needs. Without exception, all school teams involved in the program knew they could revise their practice for high potential learners. They recognised that even the very best current practice may well be insufficent for the future.

Using the term ‘high potential learners’ is considered and deliberate. It includes and broadens out from those students currently identified as gifted and talented. It is a deliberate invitation to educators to reframe the conversation and expand our thinking regarding learning growth, who is underachieving, what measures we value and how we discover and unleash potential.

The question of ‘who are high potential learners?’ is one that you are invited to grapple with. We have resisted a stringent definition of high potential learners. For many schools their answer continues to evolve and is heavily influenced by existing opportunities and school traditions of how learning is structured or enabled within and beyond the required curriculum.

HOW CAN WE GET TO KNOW THEM BETTER?

The ELEVATE schools started their innovation process by getting to know students across broad groupings rather than crafting a tight definition. Teams were quick to identify learners with high ability who were high achieving. We also invited them to identify learners who showed indications of high ability but were disengaged, along with those who demonstrated high ability but were perhaps constrained by low skills in particular areas.

Learners from across these broad groups provided a starting point for teams to embrace the empathy imperative and surface the perspective of high potential learners in their school through extended ethnographic style observations and interviews. With openness and curiosity learners shared deeper more honest perspectives about themselves and learning. This in turn enabled significant, and at times challenging, insights to surface. In many cases it was curiosity about the learner’s identity as a whole and self-concept that lead teams to the most significant insights that applied to learning.
LEARNER PROFILES: USING ETHNOGRAPHY IN A DESIGN THINKING APPROACH

“Ethnographic data is an ongoing source of challenge, foundation and confirmation. Teachers have reset their thinking about high potential learners but keep returning to ethnography and learner feedback to keep track of purpose and balance on academic focus with a well-being focus. We have shifted to a multilayered identification process.”

ELEVATE Participant

A disciplined innovation process begins with getting to know the person at the centre of the design challenge – in this case, the high potential learner. Using well-established ethnographic research techniques, 40 schools asked the all-important research questions:

**Who are you?**

**What matters to you?**

In the ELEVATE program, ethnography explored the high potential learner voice in relation to the following questions:

- How do high potential learners connect to their own learning? How do they connect to others? How do they connect to a sense of purpose?
- How do high potential learners feel? What excites them? What worries them? What challenges them?
- What do high potential learners want from their days at school? How do they view their learning experiences in school contexts?

School teams worked with their own students to develop personas or learner profiles. Through ethnography, each and every team gained a more accurate understanding of their own students and what makes them ‘tick’. Equipped with these insights, school teams could more accurately name the most pressing challenges faced by their learners.

The creation of a persona is crucial to the process of innovation. Personas give us a person to connect with, someone who will be the beneficiary of the innovation and is representative of the wider group, thus ensuring solutions are user-centred. Through structured interviews and observations, schools in ELEVATE were able to identify learner insights based on habits and goals of real learners in their specific schools. These learner profiles grounded the school-based approach, framed the key challenges and stimulated potential solutions. As teams travel through the disciplined innovation process learner profiles hold innovation teams to account; they provide a reminder of who we are designing for as new solutions emerge and are a test of a new solution’s fidelity to users’ needs.

Ethnography, a user-centred research method, is the study and recording of people through observation and immersion. Closely associated with academic anthropology this approach is used in many different fields that embrace human centred design methods, including product and service design. Recently fields from retailers to health systems and schools have been adapting ethnographic techniques to better understand the needs of their ‘users’. The process offers a ‘deep dive’ with a selection of ‘users’ rather than gathering surface information from all ‘users’.

Instead of years, they might spend a day or two with users, the researcher might find themselves shadowing a learner, observing classroom experiences, going to other contexts beyond school and using tools or prompts to better understand the user’s life experience, un-met needs and potentially even unrecognised needs.

An ethnographic study is much more exploratory than focus groups and questionnaires, aiming to create a comprehensive picture of the different parts of people’s lives that can’t be captured through other research methods. All of this creates a rich tapestry of useful evidence and a clear starting point for designing new and better things with and for them.
MEET MILLY AND JACOB

Milly and Jacob are examples of learner profiles that emerged from the program. They are illustrative of the collection we have selected to share.

Milly, 12

Milly was identified as being “highly gifted” when she was seven. However, her academic performance has been consistently average and her true potential is not often demonstrated. Her teachers have questioned her ability as she finds it difficult to engage and produce work to the expected standard.

Milly’s parents separated a short time ago which has had an impact on her home. Milly lives with a grandmother, mother and sibling and spends time with her father on weekends and holidays. She has received support via the school counsellor and many expresses concerns about friendships rather than family.

When Milly is interested she will spend copious amounts of time on a project and will proudly share her work. Other times her work is incomplete or left unfinished. Milly is highly involved in the cocurricular activities within the school.

This year she has participated in weekend sport, choir, drumming, dancing, service leadership and the gardening and cooking clubs. She was vice-captain and a passionate member of the student council. She took this role seriously, actively finding ways to represent student voice and make positive changes. She has a strong sense of social justice.

LEARNING LEVEL & POTENTIAL
Achieving sound to high results in most subjects on her report
Not worriers to potential in classwork
Loves passion projects, particularly those with social justice angle

FEELINGS & ATTITUDES
Not excited about school subjects
Loves extra-curricular and responsibility
Anxious when not in control
Frustrated
Can be very emotional and cry with joy and sorrow

TALENTS & QUALITIES
Flourishes when provided with leadership opportunity
Very fair and honest
Trustworthy and insightful
High levels of emotional intelligence
Good musically, especially in reading music but can be reluctant
Mature sense of humour
Strong sense of justice

BEHAVIOURS
Loves helping others – gets distracted and will help others rather than complete her own work
Easily distracted but very difficult to organise
Can become incredibly anxious and can throw childlike tantrums when stressed
Can challenge teachers

ADULT & PEER PERCEPTIONS
Seem as bossy
Described as difficult to warm to
Efficient
Organised when interested, disorganised when not interested
Cheerful
Strong willed
Can be non-compliant

In your context...
Is there a student who comes to mind as you met this high potential learner?

Who did you think of that is high achieving, but perhaps still coasting?

© The Association of Independent Schools of NSW
This learner had revealed indications of high ability and relative underperformance in their school context.
**Jacob, 15**

Jacob is bright, intelligent and highly capable. He approaches school and learning with confidence. When he is engaged by a topic, Jacob is self-motivated and enjoys researching and learning something new. He enjoys problem solving but admits schools is “pretty easy” and “there’s really only one teacher who challenges me.”

After school, Jacob is interested in a career in corporate finance. He enjoys, and is good at, both Mathematics and Commerce. In Commerce he made a significant profit in a sharemarket simulation game. He says this was “great, it was like real life...not like other school subjects.”

Jacob has a good network of friends, mostly from school and his various sporting pursuits. He is a balanced sports person, having played soccer at a high level. More recently he has begun cycling, tradition and mountain biking. He loves getting outdoors, finding new trails and having “a bit of an adventure.”

---

**LEARNING LEVEL & POTENTIAL**
- Highly capable
- An ‘A’ student in most subjects
- Top results in Mathematics

**FEELINGS & ATTITUDES**
- Finds school “pretty easy”
- Knows he could do better
- Acknowledges his ability in Mathematics
- Ego-centric
- Complacent about school

**TALENTS & QUALITIES**
- Self-motivated
- Confident
- Learns quickly
- Talented sports person
- Socially
- Perseveres
- Good at problem solving

**BEHAVIOURS**
- Independent learner
- A natural leader
- Switches off in mundane activities
- Can be compliant
- Relaxes well with others

**ADULT & PEER PERCEPTIONS**
- Teachers and peers consider him a leader
- Teachers recognise his potential and question his work ethic
- Parents think he lacks diligence and find this frustrating
- Good relationship with his sister but they “fight a lot”

---

Additional learner profiles are part of our Sparking Possibilities Cards. These professional learning resources complement this publication and are designed for use in your school context.
WHAT MATTERS TO HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS?

If these learners were in your school context:
- what **challenges** would they face?
- what **opportunities** would be before them?
- what **insights** would they share?
- what would be their **needs**?
- what would be the **school** and **system** challenges that need to be overcome to enable learning?

Across each cohort of school teams we listened to high potential learners to understand their challenges, opportunities, insights, needs and what school and system (COINS) challenges they experience with their learning.

It is precisely these questions that school teams explored as they used this ‘COINS’ framework to make sense of the numerous student profiles they brought to the Community of Practice and shared with each other.

**Ethnography provided a new depth of rich understanding that was used by schools to know these students better, hear their voice more clearly and think more specifically about the challenges these learners face.**

“We realised that we really had to put the students first and really think about their voice authentically and not just what we thought their voice was.”  
**ELEVATE Participant**

For most schools within the Communities of Practice ethnography has generated a more fluid, responsive definition of the high potential learner by taking context and the complexity of individual identity into account. The ethnographic research approach was designed to take the school teams far beyond the abundance of assessment data and standardised information, which is valuable but perhaps insufficient, to capture the complexity of what matters for specific learners.

Much was learnt from this research, in particular, the realisation that high potential learners will often know what does and does not work for them. Such insights compelled and motivated teams to act; they were invaluable to the design of challenging and relevant learning experiences becoming essential for those seeking to personalise learning.

Teams from the Communities of Practice presented and analysed over 200 learner profiles. Within and across the three Communities of Practice there were a number of insights that consistently came to the fore. We share these insights as a synthesis of the key aspects of the learner profiles. As a collection of what matters, according to these high potential learners, we highlight conundrums and contradictions and provide a strong indication of the complexity of high potential learner values, preferences, desires and needs in our schools.

“The power of ethnographic research has really helped us get staff on board.”  
**ELEVATE Participant**

“In the three weeks of ethnographic interviews teachers found it far easier to get to know their students than the previous eight weeks.”  
**ELEVATE Participant**
ELEVATE LEARNER INSIGHTS

This collective synthesis of LEARNER INSIGHTS is derived from over 200 high potential learners from across all three Communities of Practice.

Self-Awareness and Drive
Many learners have high expectations of their learning and achievement potential, are ambitious with their future plans and know what they need to do in order to reach their goals.

Sense of Belonging
Some learners like being at school and feel a sense of belonging because they are ‘good at school’, whereas others struggle to enjoy being there if they feel frustrated due to a lack of challenge or engagement.

Managing Expectations
Some feel concerned about their ability to live up to the expectations of others, particularly family. They can feel pressured by parental expectations around their future career.

Family Support
Family support is significant and enabling of learners to be positive and comfortable with their ability and encouraging of opportunities for the pursuit of passions and interests.

Being Compliant
Many learners believe success at school and with learning is achieved through being compliant. They speak of how their compliance around the expectations placed on them and their behaviour allows them to either escape teacher focus or gain their praise.

Playing the Game
Learners express that they ‘play the game of school’, they give the minimum effort to obtain a grade expected of them, they avoid greater expectations by others and do not seek to excel themselves.

Performance Priorities
Some learners choose to miss out on learning and social opportunities for fear of compromising their grades. Others are motivated by strong grades and rankings and, if this is not deemed attainable, they prioritise some focus areas and opt out of others.

Definitions of Success
Learners commonly link success in learning to good grades rather than progress or growth. Other definitions of success include mindset, putting in effort or gaining recognition from teachers.

Teacher Connection
Learners are clear that the quality of their relationship with teachers matters. Two types of connections are highlighted: one that comes from positive, respectful relationships with passionate teachers and a second type where a learner feels disconnected, patronised or misunderstood.

Teacher Agility
A number of learners value the different roles that teachers are able to play for them. This includes sharing subject expertise, guiding them and providing feedback.

Teacher Expertise
Some learners love to be challenged but don’t feel their teachers are providing them with the opportunity to be stretched. Some learners feel a sense of restriction when having to adjust to narrow parameters and norms within the classroom.

Do any of these feel familiar, based on what you know about your learners?

Do particular learners come to mind?

How might these play out or impact on academic success, engagement and behaviour?
Productive Discomfort
Some high potential learners rarely fail – often because they aren’t being challenged to move into a zone of productive discomfort. Learners describe being comfortable in a safe zone with some fearing what happens when they are given tasks that involve intellectual risk. Many identify as risk-averse and are easily frustrated when faced with obstacles.

Beyond Curriculum
A significant number of learners seek challenge and fulfilment through extra-curricular activities. They are consumed by the busyness of schoolwork, but not always challenged by what the standard curriculum offers.

Intellectual Stretch
Some learners recognise they thrive in high-challenge, conceptually rich environments, with tasks that require analysis, strategic and higher-order thinking.

Pitch and Pace
Some learners express frustration they are not able to determine and vary the pace of their learning. Some are annoyed with a slow fragmented learning structure; others crave more time to get a deeper, more complex understanding; others want time to explore connections with other concepts.

Needing Challenge
When feeling bored or lacking challenge, learners speak of deliberately pushing back at rules, processes and tasks that lack complexity or they see no value in. These learners are aware they are perceived as argumentative when they question their teachers.

Choice
The provision of choice is important to some learners, in both what and how they learn. The lack of choice within assessment tasks is deemed to be overly constraining by some learners.

Recognising Passions
Many learners are explicit about being captivated by learning when it connects to their passions and interests. However, some don’t feel these strengths are recognised at school or incorporated into their learning.

Purposeful Learning
Learners share being most engaged when curiosity is ignited through connections to personal interests, service learning and real-world application of knowledge. Learners want to make a difference and work on things that really matter in the world.

Social Justice
Learners recognise their heightened sense of empathy for others, and of local and global challenges facing their generation. They want to make the world a better place but also see intellectual challenge in addressing complex real-world issues.

Competition
Many are driven by competition with peers through pressure created by testing. Conversely, a healthy competitive environment with likeminded peers enables other high potential learners to thrive.

Angst About Collaboration
Although some learners are enthusiastic about collaborative learning opportunities, working effectively in groups is reported as difficult for some learners. Their concerns include: distrust of their peers’ ability to contribute adequately; peers dominating rather than collaborating; inequitable distribution of learning tasks.

Place Amongst Peers
Many young people do not feel intellectually stimulated by peers. Others are anxious that peers are intellectually superior. Many seek connection and gain fulfilment from engaging with like-minded peers, older students and adults.

Social Isolation
Some identify being a high ability learner as an isolating experience. Competitiveness, acceleration pathways and being treated differently can make it difficult to forge friendships, leading to feelings of loneliness.

Being Different
Some learners struggle with being seen as different to their peers, particularly when given a high ability label. Others embrace the difference and are keen to carve out a unique identity to set themselves apart.

Fitting In
Some high potential learners have a sense that others think (or know) they are different. They feel a strong desire to conform and fit in. They often feel misunderstood along with pressure to ‘dumb down’ their abilities.
IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS WHEN DESIGNING NEW SOLUTIONS

The learner insights that emerged can be framed in terms of conditions that enable and factors that constrain or inhibit. There are also two spheres where these conditions and factors can have impact, the student and their context. In some circumstances conditions and factors could change from being an enabler to a barrier, depending on the perspective of the individual learner or a specific aspect of the broader condition or factor. For example, for some students choice was an inhibitor, whilst for others choice provoked engagement. Likewise, the profiles represented contrasting views about collaboration and competition.

Furthermore, the insights that emerged from high potential learners are steeped in information about attitudes towards learning and schooling that are highly dependent on relationships and identity. Thus, giving rise to implications for school leaders.

It is also evident this rich and nuanced data resonated profoundly with the educators within all three Communities of Practice. Despite the abundance of assessment data that was available to school teams, the process of revealing honest student perspectives about what they valued and needed in their learning was substantial.

The context specific insights compelled teams to act and shifted their appreciation of user centric design, and the significant value user perspectives contribute to the development of their design brief that will advance their innovation. Ethnography opened the door for learners to be part of the solution, and in some schools an active part of the learning design process.

In looking to develop their unique ‘how might we’ challenge questions which serve as the basis of innovation efforts, school teams applied the ELEVATE Strategic Filters. Posed as questions these filters were developed to sharpen the thinking of school teams and raise considerations to scaffold the best opportunity for success and sustained impact of new solutions over time.

Further sense making was made by considering the seven OECD Innovative Learning Environment Principles.

“Students wanted choice and voice, both in what they were learning and how programs were delivered. As a result, opportunities have been created for high potential learners to take part in challenging learning with authentic community partners and projects that have real purpose for the students.”

ELEVATE Participant

“Our students have warmly embraced participating in our ELEVATE project and are excited to have a student voice in their learning. The power of the ethnographic profiles with narrative voices from the students have been highly effectual in planning sustainable, context specific change.”

ELEVATE Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OECD Innovative Learning Environment Principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ENGAGEMENT</strong> – Learners at the centre;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COLLABORATION</strong> – the social nature of learning;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MOTIVATION</strong> – responsiveness to emotion;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASSESSMENT</strong> – meaningful feedback for learning;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHALLENGE</strong> – stretching all students;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PERSONALISED</strong> – recognising individual differences;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONNECTED</strong> – building horizontal connections.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Community of Practice experience tells us that redesigning learning for high potential learners requires educators to embrace complexity; both the complexity of the learners and the complexity of possible solutions. Learners present with contradictory and contrasting insights requiring teachers to strive for the dynamic points of tension that enable learning and overcome barriers. This is deeply influenced by context and we see this as a dynamic and shifting point of tension rather than a fixed solution.

In advancing new and better solutions it is evident that learners themselves can exert agency to determine the learning design they deem most beneficial. The innovation methodology is deeply user-centric and keeps the high potential learner at the centre of the challenge. Across all Communities of Practice student voice changed the teams’ perceptions. Student voice from ethnography worked in tandem with research-based principles which provided the robust base and organising paradigms along with an honouring of teacher expertise.

It is evident that understanding and seeking access to learner insights is invaluable. Teacher understanding of the shifting points of dynamic tension is critical to the process of personalisation to ensure learners are challenged and supported.

“Staff are starting to use ethnography as a way of gaining a better understanding of their students as people firstly, also as learners ... this has resulted in a much more meaningful relationship being developed with students.”

ELEVATE Participant

“The ethnographic research ... has given us about six really strong themes to look at and prioritise in terms of what the students are telling us they want us to be focusing on.”

ELEVATE Participant

“Student passion and teacher perception was not correlating - it was a very important learning curve for staff.”

ELEVATE Participant

---

**ELEVATE Strategic Filters**

Are you convinced that your challenge/practice/condition will...?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELEVANCE TO HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS</th>
<th>OUTCOMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... reasonate with specific needs of high potential learners right now (not simply the needs of teachers and schools)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... significantly impact on long-term outcomes for high potential learners?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... relate to the skills and attitudes that high potential learners today will need in their lives and careers, shaped by the world as it will be in the future?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... be relevant to a large number of high potential learners in different contexts and with different backgrounds?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... provide the basis for a very different way of looking at the problem (and opportunity) that can help us do something different to what we already do now?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... contain the potential for many different kinds of opportunities and solutions?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUTURE ORIENTED</th>
<th>SIGNIFICANT APPLICABILITY</th>
<th>PERSPECTIVE SHIFT</th>
<th>OPPORTUNITY LADEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

---

**IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS WHEN DESIGNING NEW SOLUTIONS continued**

Where are the shifting points of dynamic tension for your high potential learners?

Schools are environments rich with ideas and initiatives – what filters do you use to prioritise and guide practice development?

How could the ELEVATE Strategic Filters support your innovation efforts?
Identifying and appreciating LEARNER INSIGHTS is vital to establish the points of dynamic tension that need to be in play within a learning sequence and design for high potential learners. LEARNER INSIGHTS provide the nuanced data for new solutions to overcome barriers and amplify enablers to learning. They are balanced by the ELEVATE Strategic Filters and the existing evidence base such as the OECD ILE Principles to determine the points of dynamic tension.
FROM LEARNER INSIGHTS TO DESIGN BRIEF

As a result of making their school-based Cases for Change, exploring the existing evidence base, scanning the global context through Horizon Scanning and gathering insights from their own learner profiles, the school teams developed a design brief to advance their innovation efforts.

Design briefs culminate in the proposition of ‘HOW MIGHT WE…’ challenge questions.

The following ‘how might we’ challenge questions are examples the Community of Practice schools posed for themselves.

- How might we liberate learning, thereby enabling teacher freedom and flexibility to challenge high potential learners?
- How might we effectively co-design learning experiences to increase motivation and engagement for high potential learners?
- How might we help motivate and encourage students to pursue a real-world field of study and explore new ways of engaging with these concepts that extend beyond the current curriculum?
- How might we ‘flick the switch’ in our students, so that they believe in and act on their own potential?
- How might we provide the opportunity to ignite passion and build self-efficacy in high potential learners?
- How might we shift community perception of what matters and how we measure success?
- How might we re-vision assessment to open doors for next generation learning and teaching?
- How might we design a curriculum that challenges, engages and empowers our students so they can fulfil their highest aspirations as learners, leaders and global citizens?
- How might we address the problems of perfectionism, fear of failure and reluctance to take risks that are limiting the achievements of our high potential learners?
- How might we co-construct learning to ignite passion, purpose and meaning?

Which ‘HOW MIGHT WE…’ challenge questions resonate in your school context?

How would you resolve them in your particular learning environment, for your students?

- How might we leverage our school culture to develop teacher practices that encourage greater student engagement and risk taking?
- How might we enable our high potential learners to have personalised and authentic learning experiences that position them to be leaders and initiative-takers in their future workplaces and communities?
- How might we change school systems to allow high potential learners to engage with industry?
- How might we enable voice, choice and agency (co-design) in our community in order to unleash potential?
- How might we extend learning beyond the school walls and engage our learners in real-world, meaningful projects?
- How might we recognise achievements that fall outside the mainstream classroom experience?
We examined the complete series of 120 ‘how might we’ challenge questions of the design briefs from all 40 schools across three cohorts.

Upon exiting the ‘stimulate’ phase of the triple diamond innovation model, 12 Prevailing Themes were dominant in relation to the overarching complex challenge. From this point forward schools progressed to ideate and to prototype new solutions to benefit their high potential learners around the following themes:

- Teacher agility
- Optimising learners’ skills and dispositions
- Enabling learner agency
- Learners’ mindsets
- Leveraging relationships
- Learners’ passions, interests and motivations
- New assessment practices
- Identifying high potential learners
- Inspiring and challenging high potential learners
- Co-designing learning
- Authentic learning beyond the classroom
- Redefining success.

These 12 Prevailing Themes are areas of challenge familiar to all educators. The disciplined innovation approach used to derive this list, is pivotal in enabling teams to confidently advance designing a solution that makes a difference to the students in their school.
IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

The robust nature of the ELEVATE innovation process encompasses an exploration of the needs of high potential learners and what matters to them. The learner insights gathered through ethnography, are critical for educators to know and understand, to then redesign learning or create new solutions that will work for their learners in the classroom and beyond. Teachers can use learner insights to seek points of dynamic tension in their learning design. Just as importantly, there is an imperative for school leaders to grasp and value what matters to the learners in their context, so that any new solutions ‘stick’ and endure at a school organisational level.

Using the collective synthesis of 26 LEARNER INSIGHTS from the ethnographic research three broad domains encapsulate what was found to matter to the high potential learners and how they experienced learning. The three domains were found to be:

- **Intrapersonal**
  Self-awareness, attitudes, beliefs, passions and interests

- **Connections**
  Interpersonal, contextual and purpose in the world

- **Structures**
  School (e.g. curriculum and pedagogy), family and extracurricular activities

Redesigning learning or creating new solutions for high potential learners that are impactful requires leadership teams to embrace the complex and dynamic nature of these three domains and the interplay between them to find the ‘sweet spot’.

Where the three domains intersect in the centre, there is a positive or negative impact, be it as an enabler or constraint. In this optimal zone, impact is maximised and innovation can have the most significant potential. It is also where the most complex challenges lie.

Any solution for high potential learners needs to be understood as being situated in structural, intrapersonal and interpersonal connections that are constantly in dynamic tension with one another. The challenge for leaders is to create conditions and cultures within their community that are open and responsive to new and creative ways so that these domains might work in a more fluid and flexible way. Teachers will then have the structures, resources and connections available to them to find that ‘sweet spot’ as often as possible, in turn allowing the learner to grow and thrive in their environment.

THREE DOMAINS THAT MATTER TO HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS

- **Intrapersonal**
- **Connections**
- **Structures**
MEET MORE HIGH POTENTIAL LEARNERS

We invite you to engage with the learner profiles provided which complement this publication. They are examples of how participating schools captured the essence of these high potential learners to guide their innovation efforts to redesign practice.

Each one of these learners had revealed indications of high ability and relative underperformance in their own school context.

SPARKING POSSIBILITIES CARDS

We have developed a set of resource cards so that you can further the conversation in your own school context. The aim is to support you to sharpen your focus and discover the brilliance of more learners. The resource cards provide you with guidance to embrace the empathy imperative and have extended ethnographic style conversations with learners, create profiles and develop insights. Sparking Possibilities Cards are inclusive of our sample collection of high potential learners and some suggested activities to lead conversations with your colleagues.

SPARKING CONVERSATIONS

A powerful strategy in the ELEVATE program was the use of professional conversations. If you have been inspired by this ELEVATE INSIGHTS Series, we encourage you to:

- Share this resource with at least one other colleague – maybe a grade partner or your head of department
- Email the link to colleagues in your own professional communities of practice or share it through social media
- Follow-up with a formal or informal meet-up with interested colleagues and use the Sparking Possibilities Cards to develop profiles of learners in your own context.

How will you respond to the learner insights you discover?
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for this program was provided by the Australian Government Students First Support Fund and AISNSW.

Special acknowledgment goes to AISNSW Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Newcombe AM and the advisory support from the Independent Schools Centre for Excellence Council whose leadership enabled AISNSW’s first open, large scale, cross sectoral disciplined innovation program to advance solutions for a shared complex challenge.

Initiated by the AISNSW, ELEVATE was amplified by strategic partnerships with Innovation Unit for the duration of the program and with AITSL to gather voices of thought leaders who confirmed the need for action. We appreciate the evaluation conducted by the Centre for Strategic Education which gave further confidence to our professional learning model to design new solutions to the complex challenge of responding to the apparent underperformance of Australia’s top students.

Appreciation and recognition goes to the 40 Community of Practice schools, over 70 schools in our Community of Engagement and approximately 2500 individuals in our Community of Interest who followed and brought enthusiasm to this work.

It was a privilege to design professional learning for, be inspired by and coach the educators on the teams from the following Communities of Practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community of Practice 1</th>
<th>Community of Practice 2</th>
<th>Community of Practice 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbotsleigh</td>
<td>Burwood Girls High School</td>
<td>Barker College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calderwood Christian School</td>
<td>Epping North Public School</td>
<td>Bishop Druiit College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbeltown Performing Arts High School</td>
<td>Kincoppal Rose Bay</td>
<td>Canberra Girls Grammar School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Coast Grammar School</td>
<td>Loreto Normanhurst</td>
<td>Doonside Technology High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danebank Anglican School For Girls</td>
<td>MLC School</td>
<td>Moriah College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilltop Road Public School</td>
<td>Orange Christian School</td>
<td>St Joseph’s College, Hunters Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter Valley Grammar School</td>
<td>Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta</td>
<td>St Stanislaus’ College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kambala</td>
<td>Penrhos College</td>
<td>The Hills Grammar School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knox Grammar School</td>
<td>Ruyton Girls School</td>
<td>The Illawarra Grammar School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macarthur Anglican School</td>
<td>Sarah Redfern High School</td>
<td>Wyong Christian School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monte Sant’ Angelo Mercy College</td>
<td>SHORE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Good Counsel</td>
<td>St Aloysius’ College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pymble Ladies’ College</td>
<td>St Columba Anglican School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Catherine’s School</td>
<td>St Matthews Catholic School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity Grammar School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For further information please contact Sharon Cheers, Head: School Innovation, AISNSW at scheers@ainsw.edu.au