

EMPOWER

A CASE STUDY

BRISBANE SOUTH STATE SECONDARY COLLEGE

BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

Brisbane South State Secondary College opened in 2021. The secondary school that will eventually house grades 7-12.. To date, in 2024, the school houses grades 7-10 with about 976 of students and 84 of staff members.

In collaboration with The University of Queensland (UQ), and supported by the best and most respected research facilities and institutions in Australia, the College has set the new standard in education for their students while providing additional enrolment capacity as part of the inner Brisbane secondary schools network.

BSSSC and The Learner First have partnered since the conception of the school, focused on a school built on the key principles of holistic development of students, real-world relevance, student agency, and community & collaboration. Through the lens of Contributive Learning, BSSSC has focused on effectively creating a motivated, engaged, relevant and purposeful community of learners.

A successful student at Brisbane South State Secondary College knows themselves and is a lifelong learner. They are connected, healthy, confident and self-directed global thinkers who are passionate about their desired futures.



Learner-Preneur Program

BSSSC Learner-Preneur program is a student centered curriculum where students begin to discover their passions, pursuits and purposes through exploring how they can find well-being, meaning and fulfilment. All students engage in the program at the beginning of each day. In what has become a flagship of the school, all students engage in inquiries to develop and explore the Contributive Learning outcomes of Self-understanding, connection, knowledge and competency during Learner-Prenuer.

The Empower Project

The Empower Project was created to engage year 9 students, who typically show a decline in engagement and academic success at this stage in Queensland. By allowing students to find their passion and giving them more agency over their learning, the project aims to provide a meaningful learning experience at BSSSC. The College focuses on students 'learning to learn' in their junior secondary years and transitioning them to 'leading their learning' in senior secondary. This year 9 project is a key opportunity for students to be empowered and take control of their learning, preparing them for success in their senior years.

Year 9

What DO I know and what WILL I know? What can I DO and what WILL I do?

Year 9 is built upon the foundation of the Year 7 and 8 Learner-Preneur programs that focus on Self Understanding and Connection. By year 9, it is expected that the students have developed the skills to self reflect, understand themselves as learners and the way they connect with the people around in their local and global communities.

Theory of Action

"If the students build the deep learning skills, THEN they will become agentic SO THAT they are intrinsically motivated to engage and contribute."

Learning Design

In the creation of the empower project, teachers discussed and came to an agreed language and understanding for the “why” behind the project. Student agency became a foundation of the project, starting with teachers learning, understanding, and agreeing on what agency means for their students.

This learning is important because it

- Empowers students to pursue a passion, develop additional skills and agency to make decisions
- Develops transferrable skills that can be used in other contexts etc. communication, collaboration, empathy, persistence
- Makes the learning real, meaningful and lasting
- Mobilises knowledge to change the world
- BSSSC is a school for the real world. Empower 'carries on' into their future
- Builds skills for the 21st century, some of these are: building confidence, critical thinking skills all by themselves, guided by teachers – the roles shift, teachers are guides.
- It motivates young children who are so curious to learn - year 9s are at an age to do that but not be distracted about their other life events
- Allows for self-discovery as well as stepping outside some of their current life experiences
- Enables students to discover things about themselves and build skills to engage with the real world
- Helps students practice who they want to be as an adult - practice using the skills you will need after school
- Allows purposeful learning for them and to discover their interests, or refine their interests - figure out what they don't like or enjoy
- Helps them to become more effective learners
- Assists their work in senior schooling



Student Agency at BSSSC

An agentic learner has ownership of their growth and success. They develop and apply their global competencies to drive their own learning, health and wellbeing. They have self-belief, feel valued and have a shared sense of their purpose within the community. Student agency is nurtured alongside others through connection, collaboration and contribution with local and global learning partners.

Year 9 teachers articulated the skills to focus on to develop AGENCY within the project.

Students will...

- speak up to represent their own and others views
- practice being a confident, resilient and power learner where they are
- find ways to influence powerful learning across the community
- share their ideas and opinions for decisions to be made
- provide evidence to show how they achieve stronger outcomes when students and adults make decisions together
- work with adults in making decisions for teaching and learning
- negotiate and design learning that stretches their thinking
- talk with others about what they need to learn and why
- interpret data and present their findings for future action
- see their teachers be a learner
- understanding the importance of feedback and seek it in all their learning
- give feedback to peers and teachers

Year 9 Learner-Preneur Program

Enterprise Project

students co-design a social enterprise project with the teacher, with the aim to develop creativity, character and contribute back.

Term 1

Empower Project

Term 2

Empower Project

Term 3

Leadership and Lead into Year 10

Term 4

Learning Experience

In the Empower space, both students and teachers begin without a predefined focus for each student. The primary goal is to inspire, motivate, engage, explore, and delve deeply into meaningful topics. This approach marks a significant shift from traditional methods, focusing on developing dispositions, skillsets, and mindsets.

Creating a framework that integrates questioning, feedback, and time for research and exploration was crucial in the initial phase. For some students, identifying an interest or passion was challenging. The exercise of determining a learning focus required a redefinition of traditional roles for both teachers and students. Teachers had to step back from planning content, while students were encouraged to deeply self-reflect and plan their chosen focus.

Intentional exploration of identity, identification of relevant information and processes, and redefinition of teacher-student relationships all contributed to creating a dynamic learning environment that was both intimidating and exhilarating. Courage, mutual relationships, engagement, and motivation formed the essence of this journey, with agency as the ultimate outcome.

**It communicated to students:
this is who we are, where we
belong, how we are connected,
and how we can contribute
purposefully to the greater good.**

This growth and development occurred within a structured framework. Students used digital workbooks to stay on track, working through a process that allowed for open and free choice, facilitating authentic co-creation. This approach fostered an understanding of individual identities while simultaneously building a shared collective identity, enriching both the school culture and its connection to the wider world.

Through inquiry and deep exploration, the learning aligned specific dispositions with content, honoring individual interests and skills not typically covered in the core curriculum. It communicated to students: this is who we are, where we belong, how we are connected, and how we can contribute purposefully to the greater good.

Student Perspective

Interview with a year 9 student about their empower project.

Can you tell us about your project and how it got started?

The project was an opportunity to get me started on something I've wanted to do pretty much my entire life—write a song. This was the perfect chance to do something I knew I'd enjoy, even though I didn't think it was physically possible for me.

How do you feel now that you've completed it?

Now that I've done it, it's awesome! It's so cool that I've done it now. It's really motivated me to get on that path of songwriting and being creative. As a result of the project, I've recently been trying to write loads of songs.

How did the project evolve over time?

It began as a mini documentary and morphed over time. I ended up doing a video and a song. I had always wanted to do a video format alongside the song.

How did the project evolve over time?

I collaborated with my mum and family members. My teacher helped me to track my progress using a visual in the classroom to motivate me in the stages of my project.

How did you process your ideas?

I used a suggestion from my dad. He said, "Everywhere you go, take a notebook and write one thing down." I'd get home at night and look at it to generate ideas.

What did you learn from this project?

I measured creativity and character and found out I can get stuff done if I want to get it done. I was stressing that I wouldn't have anything to show. I'm proud of myself. Having grades is a good motivation to get things done, but doing something that's a passion has no limits. You can take it any way you want. I found that really good.

How did this project help you explore yourself?

It's a good way to explore yourself and stop and think, "What do I like, who am I, and what am I going to do?" I know I need to work hard when I need to work hard.

Student Perspective

Interview with a year 9 student about their empower project.

What is your empower project?

My project focuses on creating a badminton racquet designed for flexible playing styles. Specifically, I'm addressing the differences in requirements between higher-performing players and recreational players

What aspects did you consider in your research for this project?

My research was based on the science of string tension and power, the strength and nature of the racquet composition, and the size and shape of the design. I concentrated on both the process and the structure of the research to develop a racquet that caters to the needs of both types of players, balancing power and precision.

Why did you choose to focus on both higher-performing and recreational players?

Badminton has been a passion of mine, and I've played competitively for four years. I wanted to create a racquet that provides an optimal playing experience for both competitive and casual players, offering a middle ground where power and precision make a significant difference.

How did you gather data and insights for your design?

I am currently deciding between producing 3D printed products or creating detailed sketches. I am also considering showcasing these deliverables to highlight the design process and the final product.

Can you tell us about your thoughts on the Empower Project?

I believe the Empower Project is an incredible opportunity for students to find their passion, dive deeper into it, and then showcase their knowledge.

What do you think are the main challenges students face with the Empower Project?

One of the biggest challenges for some students is actually finding a focus. Time management can also be a challenge. Some students take a long time to get started, while others race through and don't go deep enough, finishing too early.

How do you feel about the structure and freedom the project offers?

I really enjoy the freedom and time the project provides. It allows me to work at my own pace, which is very important for deep and meaningful exploration. Plus, the work is really fun!

Authentic Assessment

A process was undertaken to generate authentic feedback in 2024 from students on 6 elements of the project objectives sharing if they agreed or disagreed. 109 students shared feedback.



86%

Ownership of Learning



89%

Developed Self-Understanding



88%

Developed Character



86%

Enjoyment of Learning



88%

Development of Critical/Creative Thinking

During student led conferences in 2024, the following data was collected specific to the work done in their Learner-Prenuer class. The data is shared as an average rating out of 5. 109 students shared feedback.

"A successful student at BSSSC knows themselves and is a lifelong learner. They are connected, healthy, confident and self-directed global thinkers who are passionate about their desired future." **Considering this statement, how would you rate your success this year?**



How would you rate your overall academic growth/progress this year?



How would you rate your overall academic growth/progress this year (considering all academic, sporting, social, cultural, competencies)?



Conclusion

“They (students) are able to put themselves at the centre of their own learning. Students are beginning to apply their knowledge about themselves. That some still require more structure, discussion and reflection to further understand WHO they are... that they don't need to know everything about themselves, but to create questions and learn and explore along the way.”

-Teacher, BSSSC

The goal of education is to instill *‘lifelong learning’* into all students so that they are set up for their life beyond school. At Brisbane South, teachers are creating opportunities where young people are gaining experience and competence to explore what and how they wish to learn, without the confines of what they are told to learn and without assessment driving that learning.

“The Empower Project allows students to build self understanding grit, tenacity and perseverance (character) in their learning so that they push through a ‘learning pit’ to achieve their own defined learning goals.” -Teacher, BSSSC

Teachers are learning through inquiry and collaboration how to flip their classrooms to be student-centred and use pedagogies associated with building agency. They teach students how to find and interact with learning partners and environments that are beyond the walls of the classroom so that learning is rich, authentic and engaging for them.

“It taught me that I cannot always be in control as a teacher, but I can still create an environment for students to want to learn and develop their empower project.”

-Teacher, BSSSC

“The Empower Project and the skills required to create and develop it, has inspired me to continue to build in projects, and activities which require student agency into other subject's curriculum.” -Teacher, BSSSC

It gives our young people an opportunity to truly figure out who they wish to be through discovering their passions, pursuits and purposes.

Be patient and encourage the students to be the same. Guide them to find their project and let them know it doesn't have to be resolved at the beginning, it will change and develop.

-Teacher, BSSSC

Encourage students to never give up and to find a way to incorporate their passion into their studies.”

-Teacher, BSSSC

