

# Q NARRATIVE

NOVEMBER 2020

## VAUGHAN AND KENDALL'S STORY: FINDING AND USING RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE



From left to right: The learning leaders at Assumption driving myMap are Cristina, Alexa, Stephen, Sacha, Luke, Melissa, Shona, Ursula, Deana, Jess, Kendall and Vaughan (absent Peta)

**Vaughan Cleary** (Deputy Principal, Learning & Teaching) and **Kendall Aglinskas** (Professional Practices Co-ordinator) are both leaders at [Assumption College](#), a [large Catholic co-educational secondary school](#), located in the regional suburb of Kilmore, Victoria. Founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Marist Brothers, the school has recently undergone significant change, overturning its long-held Year 7-10 teaching approach in order to move to '[My Map](#)' – an internally-developed 'deep learning model' that allows students to tailor their own learning journey, and connect knowledge and skills gained to their life goals and pathways beyond school.

On behalf of the Assumption College leadership team, this is Vaughan and Kendall's story about finding and using research and evidence to design and then embed '[My Map](#)' into the school's culture.

### "WE WANTED A 2020 AND BEYOND CURRICULUM THAT WAS PURELY STUDENT-CENTRED"

In 2017, Vaughan and the school principal, Kate Fogarty, started with a "blank canvas" and asked themselves "What does an ideal curriculum look like?" Drawing on research, authored works and other evidence from their recently completed post-graduate Masters studies, as well as previous experience and experimentation with different ideas, Kate and Vaughan went about transforming their Year 7-10 approach to student learning. Despite having adept skills and a varied knowledge of research and evidence, Vaughan commented that he and Kate "were overwhelmed with the volume of literature out there". They decided "quite quickly and smartly" to prioritise three key works that they discovered during their post-graduate studies.

These included: [Simon Sinek's approach](#) to driving and embedding change; [Alfie Kohn's approaches](#) to challenging school paradigms; and [Dan Pink's interpretation](#) of self-determination theory. All three were selected for their relevance to Assumption College's change agenda, as well as their accompanying visual resources. The variety of TED Talks and YouTube videos helped to engage and influence staff, proving "so much more empowering and striking than trying to talk about a research paper." These works continue to underpin ongoing change at the school.

 "It's really important that staff can see that these people exist...they're real...not just an academic writing a paper. I think this gave a big push to our change agenda. And it inspired staff to go and do a lot of research on their own."

Other sources of evidence were also used. Using the [Victorian Curriculum requirements](#) as a starting point, Vaughan and Kendall referred to their post-graduate programs again to source information regarding [concepts of flow and deep learning](#). A host of professional publications, some of which were sourced through [Catholic Education Melbourne](#), as well as research-informed works regarding leadership and education change (e.g., [Bentley, 2018](#)) were considered. Target schools and practices were identified by "looking through education journals", and then visits were conducted to learn about different approaches that were potentially suitable or adaptable for the changing curriculum design. Vaughan and Kendall commented that learnings from these visits were at times "underwhelming" and highlighted the risks associated with relying on what other schools are doing without doing "your own research and innovation".

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### “THERE'S A COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO”

“Teachers want mastery opportunities themselves. They want to teach purposeful activities and they want autonomy and voice in how they run courses...So we said ‘We’re going to get out of your way and let you be the professionals and drive subjects of your choice in your way’...so long as the changes are research and evidence-based”.

Both Strategic Leadership and Learning Leader teams design and implement teaching approaches at Assumption College. Of the 18 leaders across these teams, 16 of them have completed or are completing at least one post-graduate qualification, with the majority of these being research-based Masters or PhD programs. When asked whether you can have too much research and evidence introduced into a single school context, both Kendall and Vaughan are adamant that “No, you can’t!”.

They describe how leaders are “immersed” in new knowledge and research all of the time, creating a “snowball” effect on others feeling inspired to “research and learn more” themselves. This culture has fostered a “collective understanding” of ‘My Map’ and its underlying concepts. “High level discussions” and “informal conversations” about new research, evidence and ideas are an every-day occurrence. Different resources support these discussions including: specific newsletters; Learning Leader coaching sessions;

evidence-informed podcasts sourced and shared by different staff; and a professional learning hub that facilitates access to research, professional publications and advice regarding use. Kendall and Vaughan lament “the disconnect between your standard teacher, your standard school and this increasingly rich world of evidence”, and wonder how other leadership teams, who may not have the skills and experience of the Assumption College leadership team, navigate an overwhelming and challenging landscape of integrating research and evidence with practice.

Decisions about the identification of different research and evidence and its use are made by individuals, with ‘My Map’s’ framework - mastery, autonomy, purpose and student-centeredness - also acting as guide for how to make such decisions. Kendall and Vaughan explain that if individuals want to use new knowledge or different approaches, so long as the change is purposeful and the evidence of impact on student outcomes can be shown and communicated, then “there are no rules, no barriers” around individuals’ decision-making. Overall, both believe that ‘*thoughtful engagement with appropriate research*’ is about “cutting through educational jargon and fads” and relying on trust and respect to challenge and debate amongst and with each other about connecting research and evidence with individual practice contexts and benefits for students.

“We want to be at the forefront of best practice...As the research on culture says – you set your values, you focus on three or four core themes and you build from there. And that’s what we did – we focused on mastery, autonomy, purpose and student focus. We created a bit of turbulence and we’ve seen great things emerge over time.”



School Principal, Kate Fogarty

### THOUGHTFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH AND IMPLEMENTATION OF APPROPRIATE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The Monash Q Project is interested in understanding ‘how research can be used *well* in education’, and sees teachers’ and school leaders’ [thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence](#) as core to this undertaking.

Vaughan and Kendall’s story about Assumption College’s change journey demonstrates the importance of identifying and sourcing appropriate research and evidence, assessing it for relevancy, and then ensuring it is adapted and implemented to suit specific contexts.

Empowering and upskilling individuals to identify and assess research and evidence for their own practice needs, and keeping student outcomes as a central criteria for doing this, are key to such thoughtful engagement and implementation.