Lisa Pope – Research Project teacher

Some of the really fascinating ones from the cycle of Research Project that we’ve just completed have included – one student that had stumbled across an article looking at whether cobwebs or spider webs had antimicrobial properties.

Part of this article talked about the fact that ancient civilisations and even Australian Indigenous communities had used cobwebs as a wound dressing.

And so she thought this was really interesting and cool, how could she use that for a Research Project?

So talked about it with some of our biology staff at school, evaluated her results, looked at research things and found that really as soon as you put the cobweb in a moist environment like on a agar plate, it came a food source for microbes. So it actually grew more. But it was a great project, great science learning and it was really well-managed and defined. So that was a great topic.

Some of the other fascinating ones was one of my students looked at what colour do we like our food to be to make it most appetising? And so he wrote a little program that got people to vote whether they thought food saturated in red colour was more appetising than one that had a cooler tone and basically pin-pointed the exact colour tone that we like foods to be and it was sort of a reddy-purpley colour. Which when you think, you open a bag of snakes, what bag goes first? The red ones.

Advice

Putting barriers and boundaries and thinking ‘oh no that’s too hard to manage’ just narrows down those opportunities. So it might not be easy but saying yes works so well and try and get support of colleagues within your school.

So we really encourage all of our staff to know what our students are doing for Research Project. A lot of times they’ll mentor or offer opportunities, contacts and you have such a wealth of knowledge in a teaching fraternity that it can’t be just the Research Project teachers, it really needs to be a whole-school effort and supporting students’ research.

Strategy

If you know your students and we’re they’re at, you’re able to mentor and help them. So it’s setting up a program that has a structure they can follow, but freedom within that structure to go in their own direction and be supported. And really you need to be able to be adaptable and mentor students.

And so it is quite confronting that you’re not in control of the process, quite often for new teachers that there are so many variables and unknowns but you need to step back and see yourself as a facilitator of learning. And that the students need to own their own learning and go in the directions and you be a person who’s advising but not telling.

Support

A group of teachers that were involved in the review of the SACE, the Research Project, we were having coffee and we thought it would be really good if there was a teachers’ association that could support people and provide professional development in this area.

Not just for people teaching Research Project but people who have a research factor in any subject. So Geography has its field studies enquiries, Biology has its issues investigation, most of the science subjects now have some sort of enquiry learning aspect to their curriculum. So how can we help teachers to help students know how to research well? So we decided well let’s put an association together, so we formed the Australian Secondary Research Teachers’ Association, brand new baby teacher association.

We’re looking at getting some professional development opportunities happening in the second half of the year, probably initially because we’ve had such demand looking at evaluations and doing those well and helping students construct and write really good evaluations of their research processes.