

## HUMANITIES PROGRAM ALIVE AND KICKING AT WILLETTON HIGH SCHOOL.

As one walks into the humanities building in Willetton Senior High School, one of Perth's brand new experiments,

an unfamiliar sight greets the eyes. There is a pleasant library with large, comfortable bean bags, facing a large open room, partially divided by flexible partitions to form a number of open-ended classrooms. Students walk freely to and from the library, work independently in study booths along the walls, or discuss industriously in small groups scattered around the room. Teachers are observed moving around helping student groups, while perhaps a more formal lesson may be in process with perhaps two teachers sharing the presentation.

Willetton High School, now operating at the grade 8 level, has adopted a flexible modular design, a popular American mode of construction, which builds large carpeted areas, subdivided upon demand into rooms by means of moveable partitions. This design is favoured by the humanities department as being most suitable for the style of modified open-concept learning which is occurring. John Mills, the senior master, sees education as "developing the students to fit into and lead useful lives in society." He stresses that developing student inquisitiveness and love of learning, encouraging student enquiry into problems, and encouraging student personal development are the prime aims of education.

To achieve these aims, the humanities department has adopted a number of innovative alterations to the regular curriculum. Music and drama, English, Geography and History are all integrated and share the same two hour or eighty minute time slot. Classes are divided into units of sixty students to be shared by two or three teachers. Teaching units revolve around concepts such as "food" which may be treated by a wide number of different viewpoints by all the

disciplines. Emphasis in teaching is on student "process", involving the students in using research and problem solving skills, rather than being passive receivers of knowledge. Activity booklets for the students are written jointly by the humanities staff and involve enquiry type exercises and tasks. Students are frequently involved in projects and field trips, which take the students outside the school to such places as ethnic restaurants. These visits stimulate student interest, enjoyment, and provides maximum opportunity to practice enquiry skills. When possible, field trips involve themes relating to the entire school, and all the teachers participate. Community members are also encouraged to become involved in the school, and guest speakers and mothers assisting with remedial reading are common sights.

The key aspect of the humanities program is the development of a mutually cooperative relationship and sense of trust between teachers and students which recognizes the autonomy and sense of dignity of both parties. Considerable time has been allocated at Willetton in getting the students familiar with each other, with the teachers, and with the values of the school. Education is seen as a cooperative goal, in which the students are encouraged to pursue their interests, with the assistance of the staff. Consequently, students are permitted to move about the classroom, converse with other students, to work independently or in groups, and to enter the library without formalities. Direct teacher authority is minimized, and even announcements are <sup>personally</sup> communicated and discussed in daily ten minute tutorials with one teacher for every fifteen students. There are no exams which cause a stigma of failure for weaker students. Work is evaluated in terms of comments, and five reports with comments are sent to the parents per year. Tutors, who know their students intimately, deal with problems of incomplete work or discipline, by

discussion with the students and the students' parents.

Although most new programs generate enthusiasm, students within the Willetton humanities program are exceptionally vocal in their praise concerning 'open-concept' learning. Teachers and students are on a first name basis with rapport, warmth, and mutual respect and cooperation demonstrated in classroom relations. The program's success has depended on dedication and hard work by the teachers. It is hoped that this success will continue as the staff and student population expands.