

Leading Australia's Schools

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Patrick Duignan
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Foreword

Education is a fundamental building block for our nation. If Australia's future prosperity is to continue, quality teachers and leaders are essential, indeed critical, across all sectors of education - from the early childhood years, through primary and secondary schooling, the vocational education sector and in our universities. School teachers, and leaders in particular, have one of the most important responsibilities of any profession – they are entrusted with the education of our children.

Research has shown that after parenting, the quality of teaching is the single most important factor in a student's education. Further, leadership is second to teaching as the major school-based influence on student learning. The quality of school leadership plays a vital role in supporting the learning needs of students and fostering their success.

School leaders must not only motivate, influence and inspire, but also facilitate change and innovation in their schools. Principals are the CEOs of their schools, and like CEOs they must oversee an efficient and successful business, mediate tensions between competing demands and pressures and deliver a high quality education we expect for all students.

Australian Government policies firmly support the development of professional standards for teachers and school leaders by providing \$30 million over five years to Teaching Australia – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, to raise the status, quality and professionalism of teachers and school leaders throughout Australia.

It gives me great pleasure to commend to you *Leading Australia's Schools*, produced by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders under the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme. This book celebrates the achievements of principals nationally by capturing their enthusiasm and commitment to their profession and their students.

Through their particular examples these seventeen leaders have enriched the lives of many students and their staff and wider school communities. Their stories of inspirational leadership capture the passion, energy and commitment of Australia's school leaders to provide quality educational outcomes for all Australian school students. They are just seventeen of the valued leaders in more than 10,000 schools across Australia. I thank them for their contribution and for the strong future they are helping to create for all of us.

I hope their examples will encourage a new generation of teachers on their leadership journey and the next generation of our students who aspire to be teachers.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julie Bishop". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Julie" and last name "Bishop" clearly distinguishable.

The Hon. Julie Bishop MP
Minister for Education, Science and Training

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Introduction

Leading Australia's Schools

Patrick Duignan
David Gurr

This is a book of remarkable stories. Stories of people who have dedicated their lives to making a difference for students. At a time when there is intense interest in schools by government, the media and the general public, it is important to hear the voices of the people who lead our schools to help us understand why they devote more than sixty hours a week to a job with a level of complexity and responsibility found in few occupations.

Being the principal of a school is one of the most important roles in our society. Principals make a difference to the lives of students, as they can help lift a school to extraordinary heights where students are able to perform at a level higher than would normally be expected (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Tony Considine at Thursday Island High School in the Torres Strait, and John Fleming at Bellfield Primary School in Melbourne, show that it doesn't matter what level of disadvantage exists in a community, students can be provided with a school environment that allows them to be the equal of any. Under the guidance of expert principals, schools can be inviting, exciting, purposeful and humane places that students want to go to. As Lynne Hinton comments:

Our kids enjoy coming to school. But more than that, there is a real sense of purpose about what the kids are doing. A sense that they are here for a reason, and that is to learn.

Principals directly influence the work of teachers, providing them with the inspiration, direction, capacities and working environment to ensure that all their students can achieve to their full potential (Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2006). In talking to many principals though, it can be difficult to discover their stories, as they tend to want to talk more about the school staff and what they have been doing. The writing of David Wood's chapter is an example of this, for in David we find someone who genuinely downplays his role as the foundation principal in the development of a highly regarded school.

Principals provide support, advice and a warm smile for parents and they often influence the wider community; Rhonda Brain taught a town to read!

Their work is complex (Mulford, Silins & Leithwood, 2004). Jodee Wilson uses the term 'chaos' to describe her work and sees herself as human resource facilitator, educational expert and a symbolic chief, whilst at the same time making sure her school operates smoothly. Sister Geraldine, the principal at a small Catholic school for young teenage girls experiencing serious behavioural and emotional issues, describes her multiple roles as spiritual head, social worker, and educational leader. Yet despite the demands of these multiple roles and sustaining a small special-setting school, Sister Geraldine sees her work as a privilege:

It's a privilege to be trusted by them [the students] and work with them to get the best outcomes. It's a privilege to see them grow day by day at school, to see them improve their behaviour outside school, to see their life in the family improve, to see conflict replaced by harmony. It's a privilege to help them live their lives more fully the way God wants them to live – to reach a greater fullness of life. That is the biggest reward.

It is a job with many tensions and dilemmas that need to be balanced (Duignan, 2006). Mark Doecke at Yirara College explains the tensions involved in connecting with the school community, and how the clearly-expressed school values and beliefs help resolve these:

One of my hopes for the college is that Aboriginal people will feel free to visit, chat, perhaps offer their services for some paid or unpaid work, and that we can accommodate that, as inconvenient as it may be. Yes, there will be tensions. For example, the needs of family versus the needs for education for the right behaviour. But let us not flee from those tensions, but deal with them in a spirit of openness and love, without compromising our values and beliefs. For it is our strong values and beliefs that are our strength.

Fundamentally though, being a principal is an exhilarating job, one full of possibilities and hope, one that few of us can do, but which, when done well, is one of the most satisfying of all. As John Fleming says:

I love my job, I love it. It is not all hard work and drudgery, and 'how am I going to get through it?' It is actually exhilarating.

The principals described here are all highly regarded within the profession and by their school and wider community. Many have received significant awards, including three who received Orders of Australia (Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, Rhonda Brain, Bella Irlight). They often lead complicated, dynamic and multi-faceted lives; Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann is described by Julie Wells as leader, politician, artist and educator. They represent a snapshot of the more than ten thousand principals in Australian schools. Their stories are presented here to capture some of the exhilaration of being a principal and to perhaps inspire the current generation of teachers to become principals.

Australian schools are some of the most diverse in the world. Nearly two-thirds of students attend government schools, twenty per cent Catholic schools and the remainder a diverse selection of independent schools, often with a strong connection to

a religion. Our schools compare well with those in other countries, with, for example, Australian performance in international studies of literacy and numeracy amongst the highest. This diversity and performance is a cause for celebration. It also emphasises the complexity of being a principal, and the difficulty in a book of this type to capture the richness of the Australian educational landscape.

Selection for inclusion in this book was through a process of peer recommendation using the networks of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, principal associations, and in consultation with the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). All States and Territories are represented by at least two principals, with eleven principals from government, five from Catholic and one from independent schools. Primary, secondary, special and special-setting schools are all represented. There are eleven female and six male principals, from many different backgrounds, including Miriam Rose-Bauman, an exceptional indigenous principal. All have experienced being a principal from six to thirty-six years, and all have at least five years at the school that is the main focus of their chapter.

The writers of the chapters were selected through a similar process, being nominated through the affiliate network of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders. All have an extensive background in writing on educational issues (brief biographies are included at the end of this book). Each brings his or her own style to the task, providing a richness of perspective. In working with their allocated principal, each writer was asked to consider:

1. The principal's background;
2. Why they became a principal and what the principalship means to them;
3. Key accomplishments/contributions and their personal and professional satisfactions from the job;
4. The key challenges of the job;
5. How and why they feel they make a difference in their schools, school community, wider society, perhaps with a story illustrating this; and
6. Their hopes/aspirations for the future.

We want to thank the principals for their bravery, honesty and inspirational stories. To the writers, we owe a debt for presenting the stories of these outstanding principals. To the Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Department of Education, Science and Training, and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, we thank you for the courage, patience, and commitment to this project.

As you read these chapters, reflect upon and gain inspiration from the stories. For principals, enjoy the experiences of your colleagues. For those teaching in schools, consider whether you too could be someone who makes a significant difference to the lives of young people.

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LYNNE HINTON

Leadership as Inquiry

By Clinton Golding

Lynne Hinton is a principal with a passion for learning and this has been fundamental to her success in transforming Buranda Primary School into an inspiring learning community. As a principal, Lynne believes that her role is to inquire, to learn and transfer her passion to the teachers and students.

Lynne has created a thriving learning community since becoming principal at Buranda Primary School in 1996. Then a failing school with 48 students and a falling enrolment, Buranda now has 200 students and a waiting list. The students have the normal range of abilities and backgrounds for an inner city school. However, for the last six years with Lynne as their leader, they have achieved results well above state and national means in all aspects of literacy and numeracy. Her teachers have become expert in innovative pedagogies and, for example, they not only teach Philosophy for Children but also train other teachers and help them implement this program in Australia and internationally.

What makes Lynne most proud of her school is that the children at Buranda Primary School also have a passion for learning. As Lynne states:



Our kids enjoy coming to school. But more than that, there is a real sense of purpose about what the kids are doing, a sense that they are here for a reason, and that is to learn.

Last week I had a visitor from a school in Auckland. She flew over for three days especially to visit us. She was completely overawed by what she calls the 'ambience' of the place. People describe it differently - the 'spirit', the 'tone' etc, but they are referring to the fact that the children are

Lynne Hinton, *Buranda Primary School, Queensland.*

happy, exuberant, open, confident, and have an insatiable curiosity about their learning.

As well as being full of fun and energy about learning, the students are also calm, gentle and peaceful: 'Students are thoughtful. They think about other people.' There is little or no bullying at the school because the children will not allow it. Recently a group of Year 7 students went to the principal to discuss what they described as an 'unacceptable act of bullying'. They outlined behaviour they had witnessed that they thought was inappropriate and unkind, and together with the principal discussed what steps could be taken to address the problem. The situation was resolved amicably.

Throughout Lynne's 15 years as a classroom teacher she pursued her passion for learning and experimenting with new ideas, with this becoming the cornerstone of her principalship. This passion began with a sense of curiosity and wonder and a love of the interesting and unforeseen. For example, in 1995, she completed a Masters degree in Mathematics teaching for ESL students that was based on this preference. She explains:

I love the ordered, organised, sequenced nature of maths teaching, juxtaposed by notions such as chaos theory, the unexpected, the surprising, the quirky and the paradoxical. I really like helping children see the sense in numbers so they can take control of it for themselves.

Her curiosity and wonder is transmitted to her students. She puts on the school walls quirky maths problems that students love to grapple with:

A barber in a small town claims to shave all the people who don't shave themselves and not to shave all those who shave themselves. Who shaves the barber? One student suggested an unexpected answer – the barber is a female and doesn't shave!

She celebrates the unexpectedness of learning. For example, she recently discovered a cartoon that one of her students had doodled in the margin of a book and published this in the school newsletter. It depicted two stick figures, the first of which had the traditional O for a head while the second had a U for a head. The first figure was saying, 'You have a really open mind.'

Lynne's passion for learning comes not only from the hunger to inquire and look deeper into what is possible, but also from faith in everybody's ability to learn, to take risks and try new things. Even as a new teacher she believed that she could do anything!

I remember one principal I had - I'd go into his office and say excitedly, 'I've got an idea!' and he'd laugh and say, 'No! Not another idea! No more ideas!' Funny thing is, that, these days, I have the same response from my administration officer.

Furthermore, she was willing to take a risk and had faith in her ability to learn whatever was needed to implement a new idea.

Leading learning in her school

She was also passionate about facilitating and supporting the learning of her students. There is as much excitement in helping others to learn something new as there is in learning something new for herself. So for Lynne, teaching is an inquiry into inquiry: she wants to explore how to learn and how to facilitate learning.

Lynne took her excitement in facilitating learning in the classroom and wondered what it would be like to take this to the whole school. She even had an idea, developed from her interest in Philosophy for Children, of what such a school might be like:

In my imagination was a place where children could think clearly and well, and have confidence in their own ideas, where they listened to one another and respected each other's ideas. I imagined a place where children were reflective and thoughtful, where they enjoyed their learning, were successful, and were happy. I wondered if such a place was possible. Plato said, 'Philosophy begins in wonder.' Small children wonder about everything, so philosophy at primary school seemed like a place to begin.

In 1995 she took up the position of deputy head and then became acting principal. In 1996 she commenced her principalship at Buranda and then began her inquiry into the central question: How could she facilitate the learning of a whole school, not just one class?

Her first attempt at being a principal was based on trying to fit herself into what she then saw as the role of the principal:

I just thought there was a role called 'principal' that I had to learn. I thought people turned into principals when they learned the right responses and systems. 'What would a principal do in this instance?' was what I thought of when decisions needed to be made.

At this point Lynne was trying to follow the rules for being a good principal. Despite this not being an entirely comfortable fit, this was what she thought a principal should do:

When I first started the job I guess I felt a bit 'restrained'. A sense of 'Is this what it's all about?' Not satisfying really.

An exceptional principal: Asking why

Lynne might have carried on being an ordinary, average principal. However, as she says, 'Life turned an unexpected corner'. A major life event was the catalyst for her to re-evaluate what she was doing and take the courage to challenge the norm and do what she saw was right. She abandoned her first view of what a principal was. The exhilaration of learning was what really mattered, not managing a school.

When I came back to work several months later I felt differently. I decided that the important thing was not the role itself, but the person doing it. Instead of asking, 'What would a principal do?' I asked, 'What do I want to do?' Instead of me altering to become a principal, the role of principal

altered to suit me. We're probably talking about the difference between management and leadership. For the first 10 weeks I was a manager, then perhaps I turned into a leader!

She came back a new principal and continued her journey of inquiry by moving in a new direction. She saw she had lost her vision while doing what she was 'meant to do' as a principal. Being a principal is about making the core business of a school happen: quality teaching and learning. Rather than asking, 'What would a good principal do?' and sticking with tried and true answers, she asked, 'How can I promote good learning in the school?' and began to take some risks:

I took risks in the eyes of the establishment, I suppose, but it was always with what I perceived to be everyone's best interests at heart. I always thought that, if what I was doing wasn't liked, the worst that would happen is that I would get the sack, and I didn't really mind about that. Very empowering!

Her biggest risk was implementing Philosophy for Children across the whole school. Although she was not certain whether it would work, she trusted her intuition. She believed pedagogy based on inquiry and fuelled by students' natural curiosity and wonder would be successful, and it was. Now, students at Buranda make progress by raising and exploring questions such as: Can time stop? What is change? What is the meaning of life?

Lynne has put teaching and learning at the centre of what she does as a principal. She created herself as an educational or pedagogical leader (Lindgard et al., 2003). Her work as a principal, from the point of her new concept of leadership onwards, has been based on pedagogical and educational goals rather than managerial ones. Quality learning and inquiry are her compass and her bottom line. She can use this compass to direct her towards what is really important in her school.

Having enhancement of learning as the foundation for her leadership decisions did not mean that Lynne created a strategic plan or long-term goals. Instead she saw herself as inquiring into problems as they arose one at a time: 'I wonder if this might work... How might we go about solving this one...?'

Despite making decisions about issues as they have arisen, each decision has been made from a clear vision of education and what it is to be a principal. Lynne was and is able to make decisions based on what she takes to be important, without being distracted by the unimportant details or issues. This means the buildings of the school may become a bit shabby because, instead of spending time and money to make the school look good, she spends time and money on training her teachers – up to 65 per cent of the discretionary budget, in fact. Although having the best facilities money can buy would be nice, Lynne believes that, as long as the rooms are serviceable, it is the quality of the teachers that will make the biggest difference in the learning of students.

Lynne also uses her clear vision to devote the time and energy of the school to what the school does well. She does not try to implement every educational innovation that circulates through Australian schools. Lynne has taken the time needed for philosophy to become part of the culture of the school and for it to have had a profound effect on

the students, and meanwhile she has said 'no' to anything that detracts from this.

Having a vision in place did not make the job easy, however. There are always new challenges and problems. This can be frustrating and sometimes daunting. Yet this is part of what it is to be participating in an inquiry – always seeking new challenges and questions.

Leadership as inquiry

With her vision firmly in place, she could get back to the real inquiry into being a principal. The key question was not 'What is it to be a good principal?' This question had just distracted her from the core purpose of education. Instead, the question was the same for her as a principal as it had been for her as a classroom teacher: 'How can I make learning exciting, challenging and surprising?' The model of leadership that Lynne created presented leadership as a type of inquiry: an inquiry into what makes good learning and how to make it happen.

The best answers to what makes good learning can be found by examining the ideal classroom. An ideal classroom for Lynne was, and still is, a place where students and teachers have a passion for thinking, learning and inquiring. Students still have to learn number facts and spelling. This is necessary for effective learning. Yet the teacher also has to lead learning through creating an environment of questioning, wondering, imagining, puzzling and 'ah-ha' moments. This leading of learning is shown by the questions she asks, such as: 'What weighs more, one kilogram of potatoes or one kilogram of feathers?' And it is shown by the answers she receives from students after they carefully consider her questions: 'The feathers, because the birds might still be attached.'

To create such a classroom, Lynne had to facilitate the learning of her students. Her role as a principal is now an extension of this concept of facilitation. As principal she now facilitates the learning of all in the school. She has created a supportive, challenging, inquiring environment and now she only has to intervene to deal with problems that threaten to undermine the learning culture of the school.

To support the teachers in creating a passionate and inquiring learning environment, Lynne has helped her teachers design a collaborative vision of what they wanted for the school and then promoted further inquiry into how to achieve and improve this vision. She started with the passion for teaching and learning that her teachers already had. When she became the principal, one of the two teachers in the school was passionate about real life learning, and the other was passionate about multi-age classrooms. Lynne added her own interest in Philosophy for Children to the mix. This formed the beginning vision, which was developed with the addition of new teachers as the school grew. Philosophical inquiry and environmental learning in multi-age classrooms became the foundation for the learning in the school. Continuous inquiry into how to achieve the collaborative vision helped the teachers stay focused on their prime job of developing learning.

Teachers are now expected to be excited by learning and are supported in creating this excitement. New teachers are mentored through this process. A good example is a new teacher in the school. Lynne has fostered his passion for learning. He comes to her and asks excitedly, 'Can I try this out in the pool and see if it floats? If I do a risk

assessment, can we make catapults?’

Despite a shared vision, sometimes the teachers would become lost or bogged down. Then Lynne’s job is to remind them of their vision. She uses this approach to bring them back to their own excitement for learning:

I think it’s hard for teachers to stay focused on this, given the day-to-day things they have to deal with (who has head lice this week?). It’s the leader’s job to keep refocusing people. To refocus those of us who once knew where we were going, and to allow the new ones into the club.

A second way in which Lynne facilitates the school being a community of inquiry is to create an environment of care and trust. She believes that, without the school being a safe and open place, good learning is unlikely to occur.

In part, Lynne has created an environment of safety and openness by being a key person the children can trust. For example, she has a permanently open door policy. Students can stop her or can come into her office anytime to chat about their learning or their lives. She is never too busy for a child:

Kids come in here and ask for a clue to the maths problems I have put on the wall, tell me about someone being unkind to someone else, or state that for every right answer there is an infinite number of wrong ones.

Another way Lynne made the school a safe place to learn and inquire was by making the school a predictable environment for students. For example, she had a grade six student who was struggling with anxiety. The student felt safe to email Lynne and say, ‘I’m scared about going to school.’ Lynne supported the child through a tough patch. Later the child emailed her, saying, ‘I’m doing OK now.’

This same trust and safety is provided for the teachers as well as the students. Lynne trusts them as professionals. Risk-taking in their learning, teaching and inquiring is encouraged and there is no blame if things go wrong.

Lynne’s approachability and her emphasis on trust and safety are based on the perspective that she is no better or worse than anyone else – she might have bigger responsibilities and accountabilities, but this does not make her a better person. She is constantly aware that others in the school – teachers and students – might have better ideas and answers than her own, and she seeks out these ideas. Because of this, risk-taking and sharing of diverse views are encouraged.

Everyone in the school is a learner and a person. This is important to avoid an ‘us’ and ‘them’ model of teaching where the students are treated differently from the teachers. This model can set up conflicts between the two groups. Instead, at Buranda, everyone is a learner and some learners are responsible for improving the learning of others.

Creating a safe environment was not enough, however, to fulfil Lynne’s role as an educational leader. A safe environment is important but it is never enough for quality learning. She also had to make sure the learning in the school was challenging and rigorous. Because learning is so important, Lynne creates a safe environment and holds high expectations of everyone in the school. She provides a ‘warm demandingness’ (Lindgard et al., 2001). These high expectations are her gifts to students and teachers. She believes they can achieve more, then they believe, and then they do.

Students are trusted to manage and create their own learning. At one point students

had been crossing the bridge near the school and noticed lots of dead fish in the water. They came to Lynne and she asked them, 'What are you going to do?' They wrote to the city council, the newspaper, their member of State Parliament, and the Environment Protection Agency (EPA). As a result they had an article and photo in the newspaper, and the EPA did a study of the waterway and made a presentation to the students about what chemicals were found, and their effects and likely sources. When the Minister for the Environment came to the school, she was presented with a petition to clean up the river, and this petition was lodged in Parliament. As a result of their efforts, the river was cleaned up.

Maintaining the passion for inquiry

Lynne makes sure the environment at Buranda is intellectually challenging for teachers and students alike, as this is the best way to ensure deep learning. Although there is no blame if things go wrong when taking a risk, the teachers are pushed to constantly challenge themselves and develop their professional skills and knowledge. For example, all the teachers are required to undergo the extra training required to obtain a qualification to teach Philosophy for Children, and many also have the advanced certificate which enables them to train other teachers. Lynne comments that:

People sometimes say to me, 'It is easy for you: you get all the good teachers.' They come here and they get better because they are expected to. Everyone is constantly striving to improve, particularly in the area of philosophy and pedagogy. It makes for a dynamic, competent energetic group of people. That's exciting. I guess, then, that the role of the leader is to make sure that everyone is heading the same direction as a cohesive whole. Pretty daunting.

Lynne's inquiry as a principal is ongoing. Because she has created Buranda as a learning school, she is always seeking new challenges, new problems, new questions, and new inquiries. For example, a recent challenge was that the school was getting a little stale – 'The fierceness had gone out of the work.' To resolve this, Lynne turned it into an occasion for inquiry with the teachers about who they were and where they were going:

One of the things I have to think about is the need to keep reminding us who we are and keeping the focus for everyone. How do we stay the best? How do I ensure that people new to the school – teachers, parents – know our story? I also have to think about what happens when I go. Even though there is a huge amount of expertise here, a new principal is likely to come in with different ideas and priorities and change everything. There is no requirement for them to keep anything the way it is.

So is there a secret to Lynne's success? Lynne is modest about this. She still feels humble and daunted by some of the challenges, and to a certain extent she sees herself as still learning. She started as a learner:

There was nothing expert about me in the beginning. The only difference between me and the others was that it was my head if things went wrong.

But I never mind about that.

And she continues as a learner:

All my staff have more expertise than me in many areas. We all need each other! Don't ask me any questions about rolling over financial journals!

Although she realises that she has learned a great deal compared to what she knew before, or where other principals may be, she still sees herself as a learner, with all the humility that this involves.

The differences she sees between what she does as a principal and what some others do she accounts for as a matter of personality and experience:

I still think it's a job that really has to come naturally to a large degree. Sure there are things that can be taught, but only to the right people. A good leader needs courage, compassion and determination. They need to be flexible, patient and humble. They need to genuinely like people and be prepared to strive for the best on their own and other people's behalf. Energy, enthusiasm, commitment!

However, this view glosses over what is truly inspiring about Lynne's achievements. She may not see herself as the all-knowing expert who has 'made it', because she still sees opportunities for learning and inquiry. But what Lynne has achieved cannot be merely attributed to her personality or experience. This would ignore the risks and challenges she has deliberately sought and embraced. A better explanation is that she has consciously created herself as a learner and inquirer. She has allowed herself to be ruled by her passion for learning, come what may. She has pushed through the problems and challenges where many would have given up and taken the safe traditional road. She has taken risks. She has learned and allowed others to learn. She has built something significant.

Lynne's success is built from regarding leading as inquiry. What Lynne's success demonstrates is not so much about her personality as about her attitude to learning. Being a passionate learner is essential to being a principal.

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2

Sr GERALDINE MITCHELL

One Person is as Important as the Whole World

By Rod Chadbourne

Sister Geraldine Mitchell has been leader of St Clare's School in Perth for over 17 years. During that time she has helped sustain the integrity, vitality and viability of the school, and the philosophy and program of the school has helped sustain her. The rock upon which Sister Geraldine and St Clare's stand is the spirit of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd was founded in France in 1835, primarily to support the rehabilitation of delinquent girls and women, and protect them from moral danger. The philosophy of the Order is based on the conviction that 'one person is as important as the whole world', and that people need the creativity and courage to develop (Byrne, 2002, p.vii):

- Genuine relationships which affirm the dignity of all persons;
- A grass root knowledge of people's lives and what marginalises them;
- A practical response to situations and needs; and
- A commitment to work to change systems and attitudes which oppress or discriminate against the poor.



For the first 50 years, the Home of the Good Shepherd in Perth provided work and accommodation for many young women, but did not conduct its own school for girls of compulsory education age. By 1956, a growing number of young teenagers entered the Home, so the Order built a new two-roomed school for them and named it St Clare's. Since the 1980s, the school has moved site four times.

St Clare's school

St Clare's was set up to cater for young teenage

Sister Geraldine Mitchell, St Clare's School, Perth, Western Australia.

girls experiencing serious behavioural and emotional issues. Currently, it operates within normal school hours, covers Years 8-12 and has a total enrolment of 30 students. It is the only school in Australia based on the spirit of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

The girls who attend St Clare's do not fit into regular schools. They find regular schools to be disengaging and alienating, and regular schools often find them to be unteachable and unmanageable. Only 30 places are available at the school. The enrolment process involves referrals of prospective students to the school principal or psychologist, interviews with those students and their families, and acceptance by St Clare's Admissions Board.

St Clare's current staff includes a principal, four full-time equivalent teachers, a half time teacher aide, a youth worker, administrative officer, part time social worker, part time psychologist and part time chaplain. This level of staffing reflects the difficult and demanding nature of their work, much of it involving one-on-one counselling and tutoring of the girls.

Providing staff to meet the labour-intensive needs of the students is expensive. St Clare's receives funds from government grants, the Catholic Education Office, the Good Shepherd Sisters and donations from community and business groups.

The students at St Clare's are grouped into three classes of 10. Each class has its own program. A Year 8-10 class undertakes school-based State Curriculum Framework courses. A Year 9-10 class, consisting of students who have been away from school for a long time, studies Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses as a developmentally-appropriate strategy to catch up on basic literacy and numeracy skills. A year 11-12 class completes a program that contains a mix of school-based courses and some provided by the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education. All three programs contain a work experience component, in order to make students aware of the skills needed in the workplace. Academically, the school aims to provide students with the same opportunities that they would receive in a regular school, so that they can return to their local school if they reach the stage where that is appropriate. Within each of the three classes, each student has an individual academic program, so classes operate differently from those in regular schools.

Sister Geraldine

Sister Geraldine's father died in 1956, the year that St Clare's School opened. She was 15 at the time and after completing Year 10 had to leave school and get a job. For three years she worked with an insurance assessor and at a manufacturing company. At the age of 19, Sister Geraldine joined the convent of the Good Shepherd in Melbourne, completed her novitiate training, and then served as a Sister of that Order in various parts of Victoria. She moved to Western Australia in 1975 and worked for 14 years as a staff member at St Clare's.

In 1989 Sister Geraldine became principal of St Clare's when the foundation principal, Sister Patricia, retired. It was not a position she sought or had to contest. She was simply the most appropriate person for the job, the undisputed heir apparent, the person whom Sister Patricia had intended to take over the school to ensure a seamless succession. Sister Geraldine was a long serving, practising Sister of the Good Shepherd. As such, she could provide the school with spiritual leadership. Shortly

after joining the staff in 1975, Sister Geraldine successfully undertook a mature age matriculation exam, and then completed a degree in social work and a diploma of education at Curtin University. This gave her the credentials to operate as both a social worker and teacher at St Clare's, although when accepting the position of principal at St Clare's, Sister Geraldine recognised it would comprise four roles: spiritual head, educational leader, social worker, and teacher - a rare, and possibly unique combination in Australia. She explains:

In my role as principal, I'm first a Good Shepherd Sister, secondly a social worker, and thirdly a teacher. It all operates in my work as a principal. Separating out these four roles is not possible; they are me.

Being the spiritual head

What does being a Good Shepherd Sister commit a principal to? For Sister Geraldine, it means reaching out to the marginalised, to those largely excluded from the community, and helping them manage their lives better through a living faith. It means finding ways to enact the Good Shepherd spirit of inclusion, respect and hope for the future, for each and every student. It means responding to these marginalised young people and their families. For Sister Geraldine, part of the human condition is that we have a responsibility to each other. She says:

I've always had that. It's inbuilt. It's what I've grown up with. It comes out of my Catholic upbringing, being taught in a Catholic school and being part of the Young Christian Workers' Movement formed by Cardinal Cardijn. The model of Jesus caring for and respecting each individual is not a one-way thing. We always benefit when we reach out to others.

People who work at St Clare's come to the school with a 'shepherding spirit'. Part of Sister Geraldine's role as spiritual head is to inspire them to maintain that spirit. Despite the intensity and centrality of this role, Sister Geraldine performs it through a down-to-earth approach. For example, she works in lay attire, and the religious symbols throughout the school are present but not intrusive. Much of her spiritual leadership takes the form of modelling her religious culture and relying on values being caught rather than taught.

St Clare's is a Catholic school. As spiritual head, Sister Geraldine ensures that the Christian religion forms a pivotal part of its philosophy, not only as a separate element in its own right but also as a spirit that cuts across and infuses all other elements. The school does not require staff or students to be Catholic – over half the students are not – nor does it attempt to convert them to the Catholic faith. Staff meetings open with a prayer and at the beginning of each semester the staff have time for some collective religious reflection. In keeping with its student-centred philosophy and Good Shepherd spirit, St Clare's adapts the religious element to make it more appropriate for the girls. More specifically, as Sister Geraldine points out, religious education at the school is geared around the life of Christ and gospel values, rather than around sacraments and other elements of the Catholic faith.

Inclusiveness occupies an important place in Sister Geraldine's thinking on social

justice and the meaning of 'One person is as important as the whole world.' For example, she sees a proactive approach to teaching Aboriginal students as part of the process of reconciliation. Forty per cent of the students at St Clare's are Aboriginal and Sister Geraldine recruits Aboriginal staff and volunteers as role models for the girls. She also supports Aboriginal families who want their daughters to gain an education in an atmosphere where they and their culture are respected.

Sister Geraldine the social worker

The social work component of Sister Geraldine's role as principal is informed by the philosophy of the Good Shepherd sisters. It commits Sister Geraldine to giving higher priority to the socio-emotional needs of the students than to managerial tasks set for principals. It adds substantially to her workload because the needs of the girls and their families are multi-faceted and demanding. And, more so than in most other schools in the state, social work is indispensable for success at St Clare's. Why? Because girls admitted to the school suffer from severe behavioural, social, emotional and psychological difficulties. These difficulties result from habitual truancy, failure at school, constant change of school, low self esteem, lack of confidence, poor relationships with peers, serious conflicts with teachers and authority figures, repeated suspensions, substance abuse, psychological or psychiatric disorders, and dysfunctional families.

The difficulties experienced by the girls often require Sister Geraldine, at short notice, to make home visits to 'pour oil on troubled waters'. Sometimes she drives large distances in doing this. During a recent visit, for example, a mother complained that her daughter did not come home straight from school. In response, the daughter claimed she had asked her Mum for permission to come home a bit later. Further discussion revealed that the mother may not have heard the daughter's request over the noise of the washing machine. Consequently, communication problems are now being addressed through regular counselling with the student by an appropriate agency.

More serious situations arise when family conflicts force girls to leave home. Sister Geraldine, supported by other members of staff, responds to these emergencies by finding the girls temporary alternative accommodation and working to stabilise the conflict. Added complexity occurs when whole families are evicted from their homes. In these cases Sister Geraldine works for days writing letters, contacting agencies and counselling parents to help find solutions to the difficulties.

It is easy to think that the social work undertaken by Sister Geraldine could and should be done by other agencies, and at times it is. But often it is not, for reasons such as: the situation requiring a quicker response than support agencies can manage; extensive requests to agencies failing to bear fruit; students having had bad experiences with some agencies in the past; or the case needing to be handled by a professional the students know and trust, like Sister Geraldine or other support staff at the school.

From time to time within the school, past traumas resurface, conflicts flare up between students, tensions arise between students and teachers, and a range of other things happen that fragment interpersonal relationships and leave the girls emotionally distraught. In these situations, the girls usually go to Sister Geraldine. She is the person whom the students know will drop everything and give them the time of day: the person they can safely confide in; the person they can look to for reassurance and

guidance; the person they can rely on to be non judgmental and constructive. After listening to the case, Sister Geraldine asks the most appropriate support staff person to help the student deal with her feelings and break the problem down into manageable chunks to work on together.

Sister Geraldine the educational leader

As educational leader, Sister Geraldine encourages staff members to constantly develop and deliver programs that better meet the individual needs of St Clare's students. This involves continually helping students reflect on what they want to achieve at school to reach their personal goals, so that learning is relevant to their lives. The girls at St Clare's are very vulnerable, quick to define themselves as 'failures' and often lose heart. Teachers have to work through these problems and identify steps the student needs to take to manage the situation better. A key principle of St Clare's philosophy is that, if a mismatch arises between a student's needs and school practices, the school must adapt to fit the student. For Sister Geraldine, this principle has a pragmatic and philosophical base.

Pragmatically, says Sister Geraldine, if the school does not adapt to fit the students' needs, then learning simply will not take place. She attributes this conviction to her mentor, Sister Patricia, who would say, 'If the students aren't learning, then we have to change. If we don't change, then we'll be no more successful with these girls than regular schools.' Philosophically, she believes that it is not just the students' needs that should be met; it is also their rights, particularly their right to an appropriate education. Of necessity, she says, regular schools often do not meet every student's needs. We have got to expect some fallout. At some stage in their education, some students find they can not engage in regular schools. This makes them different and that difference has to be respected and catered for. Also, if regular schools do not meet the needs of some students, then it may not be the fault of these individuals or their families. In such cases, the students have a need for, and a right to, alternative forms of schooling. Sister Geraldine operationalises this by adopting procedures and learning processes to meet the needs of each student.

Operationally, says Sister Geraldine, the principle of adapting the school to fit the student has to be considered on a daily basis. For instance, a student may arrive at school too tired to work, because during the night a visit from relatives leads to a noisy party and the student gets no sleep. In such a case, says Sister Geraldine, 'We adapt to the girl's needs and offer her the chance at school to lie down for an hour or two. We adapt to the difficulties the girl is experiencing rather than making the girl adapt.' She cites another example:

One day I watched a teacher briefing the class at the beginning of a lesson. One student wouldn't settle and listen. This frustrated the teacher, who wanted the student to conform. We discussed the situation with Sister Patricia, who asked whether the girl understood what was being covered in the briefing. The answer was yes, so Sister Patricia's advice was to give the girl the work straight away, before the briefing. In other words, adapt the style of teaching to fit the girl's learning style, rather than expect the

girl to conform to the teacher's teaching style.

Sister Geraldine strengthens St Clare's capacity to adapt daily to fit students' needs in a number of ways. Firstly, she fights for the resources required to make adaptive education achievable. Secondly, she knows that for new teachers, abandoning the way they taught in regular schools makes them feel powerless, so she helps them make the transition because:

There's always a mismatch until teachers adapt to our environment. Teachers often find they're not in control and I have to work hard to help them recognise the students' needs and respond to them.

Thirdly, Sister Geraldine acknowledges that even long-serving teachers, including her, face an ongoing battle to keep adapting their approach to fit the needs of the students. So, she says:

We just keep on looking for new ways. It happens daily at the school, and at staff meetings we identify difficulties. We focus on what we can do differently to help the student make choices that will help her to grow.

Fourthly, Sister Geraldine develops detailed knowledge of each and every student. In her capacity as a teacher, she works one-on-one with individual students and gains insights into their learning capacities and difficulties. As a social worker she visits students' homes to develop a greater understanding of their needs and establish a partnership with the parents/carers. As principal, she constantly consults the teaching staff, youth worker, psychologist and chaplain to keep up-to-date with the progress of each and every student. Also, the open structure of the school makes Sister Geraldine accessible to the students and the daily activities of the students observable to her. All this takes place so that she can do justice to her conviction that:

An important part of my role in this school is to work with the teachers so that they can teach these difficult youngsters. As principal, I need to know the students and teachers well and work with them to get the best outcomes.

Another large aspect of Sister Geraldine's work as educational leader centres on managing the school's partnerships with parents and the implementation of curriculum change. The following examples offer a sample of her leadership in these two areas.

Each term, Sister Geraldine, the school psychologist and the appropriate classroom teacher conduct a review of progress with each girl and her parents: that is, 30 reviews, one for each student. At these reviews, Sister Geraldine and her colleagues inform the parents about what is happening at the school and about their daughter's work and contribution to the school community. For their part, the girls show their parents some work of which they are proud and thus gain recognition from a wider audience for their efforts. The students find that their parents' approval is very reinforcing. The reviews also allow the parents to give Sister Geraldine and her colleagues feedback on how the educational program affects home life, as well as raise any issues that need to be resolved to help their daughters. Both parties discuss any behaviour management issues, ways to address them and types of counselling that may be helpful. Other topics

for conversation include holiday activities offered by the school and opportunities for students to become involved in local community programs for youth.

Managing curriculum change at St Clare's forms an important part of Sister Geraldine's work. She takes responsibility for keeping up to date with the changes, making sense of them, locating and developing resources to deliver them, keeping the staff abreast of system-wide innovations, and getting the school involved early with their implementation. The following example shows how things work at St Clare's. A new teacher raised the idea of offering the girls an opportunity to study some Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses as part of their program at the school. Sister Geraldine and the other teachers saw merit in that proposal and managed a process to develop this. The process involved consulting with the staff and outside agencies about VET courses offered through TAFE and talking with the Catholic Education Office about meeting the professional development needs of members of staff. In the end, most staff completed the Certificate 4 Course in Assessment and Workplace Training at TAFE, so that they could teach TAFE courses under the auspices of a local TAFE.

Things that sustain Sister Geraldine

For Sister Geraldine, being principal of St Clare's is not an eight hour, five day a week job. It is a way of life. It is a vocation in which she does whatever it takes to make things work. To cite one example, for the past 20 years, Sister Geraldine has used St Clare's mini bus to pick up students in the morning and bring them to school, sometimes from as far away as 40 kilometres. She does so because history shows that, unless students are transported to and from school the absenteeism rate shoots up, the teachers get frustrated because they feel their preparation is wasted, the students make little progress and they do not gain a sense of achievement.

Making things work at St Clare's is not pain-free. On many occasions, Sister Geraldine has had to face uncertainty, disappointment, frustration, fatigue and the prospect of burn-out. What has kept her going for over 17 year as principal? Many things: her religious faith, the support of community life and prayer, the creativity and commitment of her staff, assistance from the Catholic Education Office and the Good Shepherd Sisters, contributions from volunteer mentors and community groups – to mention a few. Sister Geraldine emphasises that:

The school only survives because of the wonderful teachers, at every stage, whose devotion to educating the students calls forth their patience, encouragement, creativity and determination that the students will succeed. The resilience of the teachers, in the face of abuse, conflict and decisions that fail, is a great model of the resilience, that the students need to keep on trying in the face of their lack of confidence, sense of failure and low feeling state. The teamwork that supports the teachers and the support staff in times of harmony and in times of stress also supports me.

One thing not listed above is the continual inspiration that Sister Geraldine receives from girls at St Clare's, who succeed against the odds. And the odds are great. For a start there are the severe social, emotional, psychological and behavioural difficulties

that beset the girls. Then there are the long distances the girls travel to attend the school, in some cases a round trip of almost 80 kilometres each day. Additionally, some girls complete their studies despite personal ill health or caring for parents with illnesses, at times terminal.

Success comes in many forms

The sort of success achieved by the girls, which inspires Sister Geraldine, cannot be measured by a school's ranking on academic league tables, team victories in interschool sporting competitions, or school leavers who gain entry to elite universities. Not that these outcomes are permanently beyond the girls' reach. It's just that, in the short term, there are more pressing needs to be addressed. Meeting these needs takes time, and within the context, represents significant development. For example, increasing attendance and participation at school, making a breakthrough in learning basic literacy and numeracy skills, and building relationships of trust and mutual respect may seem simple, but when applied to the girls at St Clare's, they are outcomes that have eluded regular schools. It is important, says Sister Geraldine, to remember that:

Success is relative. Students (at St Clare's) don't have to achieve everything to be successful. If a student makes some progress in a unit, then that's success. If a student finishes a course, that's success. If a student leaves school without achieving her educational goals, this can be seen as a success by her parents, if family relationships have become happier.

You keep going because you know you can change the girls' experience (in regular schools) of feeling pain and stress and family conflict. You can change that to the feeling of being known personally, experiencing success and feeling self assured. To see a smile on the face of a student who hasn't smiled for two months or two terms, and whose whole bearing has been tense, and know you make them feel happy, comfortable and assured, is reward in itself.

For someone who has been at St Clare's as long as Sister Geraldine, success can be seen not only in short term achievements but also in long term impact. In looking back over the past 30 years, Sister Geraldine takes pride in the number of girls from St Clare's who, in later life, have gone on to further study and obtained jobs in the workforce. She receives inspiration from past students who have become loving and supportive parents, who are as patient with their teenage children as she was with them, and who get counselling for their children when difficulties arise. She gets a boost, even from past students whom she thought were unsuccessful at St Clare's. For example, one student, who dropped out before completing her course, highly recommended the school to a friend with a daughter in difficulty. Another student, who wanted to get back to her regular school, where she could be absent without her mother finding out, later in life encouraged her younger sister to apply for a place at St Clare's. And some students who years ago left St Clare's, seemingly dissatisfied, have wanted their own daughters to be enrolled at the school.

It would be easy for Sister Geraldine and her staff to take credit for the success of girls at St Clare's. Regular schools often fail to cater for these girls, and that is why

they go to St Clare's. At regular schools, some students succeed in spite of, rather than because of, the school. At St Clare's, that rarely, if ever, happens. However, while Sister Geraldine rejoices in the success of the girls, she resists accepting credit for it. In her view, to do so would devalue the input of the girls themselves. She believes God gives everyone free will and that the girls who succeed actively choose to work hard for their success. When pressed, Sister Geraldine acknowledges that success involves a partnership between the students, their home, and the school all working together. But, she says, within this partnership the girls play the leading role and the school plays the supporting role. Even so, this does not diminish her joy in feeling that:

It's a privilege to be trusted by them and work with them to get the best outcomes. It's a privilege to see them grow day by day at school, to see them improve their behaviour outside school, to see their life in the family improve, to see conflict replaced by harmony. It's a privilege to help them live their lives more fully, the way God wants them to live – to reach a greater fullness of life. That is the biggest reward. That is what the 'shepherding spirit' calls us to do. Being principal is a partnership with Jesus. I need to remind myself of that when the pressures are overwhelming.

An inspirational leader: One person is as important as the whole world

Sister Geraldine is, however, an enormously caring and thoughtful human being and a courageous leader, who has dedicated herself tirelessly to improving the lives of those on the edge of Australian society.

Her positive influence extends far beyond the school campus – Sister Geraldine actively involves herself in the family and community lives of her students, calling often at students' homes, providing respite care, counselling families, transporting and accompanying students and family members to medical appointments, funerals and other events, delivering food packages and being a consistent presence to all who need her.

Sister Geraldine demonstrates an extraordinary ability to enhance the lives of the girls of St Clare's. She is particularly attentive to instilling in the girls that they are valued as human beings and is sensitive to their needs not just as students, but as people.

The young girls of St Clare's would normally be lost to the education system, however Sister Geraldine's quiet determination and unwavering faith in them enables them to feel valued as human beings and to see that they have an important role to play in their family, the wider community and society in general.

The skills and care extended by Sister Geraldine go beyond the school day and enable the girls to have confidence they can meet the extraordinary challenges that they face, given their various family predicaments. In the face of adversity, these girls know that Sister Geraldine, as their former principal, mentor and friend, will be there to walk with them as they overcome their hurdles.

As a person, Sister Geraldine is not without human imperfection. Despite all the hours ferrying students, she has a legendary poor sense of direction and, in other contexts, can get hopelessly lost at times. Also, every square inch of the desk and

meeting table in her office is covered in a mass of merged piles of reports and paper. This often results in frantic prayers to St Anthony and phone calls to staff as she searches for 'missing' documents.

More seriously, as a principal, Sister Geraldine's power at St Clare's is based on persuasion not coercion, and on her personal qualities, not her position. This applies to her influence with students and staff. One of her many qualities that has a pervasive impact on the school is her unshakeable belief that the teenage girls who come to the school should not be regarded as victims suffering from personality deficits or as needing pity and charity. Rather, they should be regarded as normal people in need of opportunities to develop knowledge, skills and values, that so far life has denied them. In particular, they need the opportunity to learn in a safe environment, free from put downs and attacks on their self esteem, free from bullying and other forms of abuse, and free from a culture of despair, defeatism and dumbing down. It seems that Sister Geraldine's whole life at St Clare's has been dedicated to providing those opportunities. The teachers know that. The students know that. The parents know that. It also seems that, once enrolled at St Clare's, there is nothing the students can do to make Sister Geraldine think ill of them, or give up on them, or change her conviction that they have the right to finish the course.

Sister Geraldine is very comfortable talking about the philosophy and programs of St Clare's. She has a detailed knowledge of the programs and a deep understanding of the philosophy on which they are based. She is also very good at explaining how input from the students, staff, volunteers, Church and community groups make the school successful. But she is not very comfortable and not very good at talking about her own qualities and achievements. A quick word with others, however, leaves you in no doubt that she is the leader at St Clare's; she is the person from whom others draw strength and direction.

At the end of this year, Sister Geraldine will retire. Some things go without saying, but nevertheless should be said. As principal of St Clare's for over 17 years, Sister Geraldine has made a huge contribution to the school and the hundreds of girls who have passed through its doors. The laughter of students and staff at recess, the progress made by the girls academically, and the number of past students, who keep in touch with Sister Geraldine and still come to her for support, are testimony to the enduring impact of her leadership at the school.

Without the spirit of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, St Clare's would not operate the way it does, nor would Sister Geraldine. It is this spirit that provides them with the basis for making a difference in the lives of the girls, whose desires and efforts to complete their education give them hope for the future. It is schools like St Clare's and principals like Sister Geraldine that give all of us reason to believe that 'one person is as important as the whole world.'

Sister Geraldine's story and her deep beliefs in what she does, and in the girls' potential for success in life, are an inspiration to us all, and especially to other school principals. It would seem that a major key to successful leadership is to have a defined philosophy, a belief system, clearly articulated values and then the courage of our convictions to live by all of these.

Sister Geraldine not only models the spirit of the Good Shepherd but inspires staff and students to always respect the dignity of themselves and each other.

3

JODEE WILSON **Welcome to the Dance**

By Neville Grady

Jodee Wilson smiles and laughs a lot but she does not see herself participating in 'fun' activities where the education of children is concerned. On her own admission, Jodee is a '24/7' devotee to the educational enterprise. She is able to make some sort of sense out of the 'chaos' of schools and schooling and is adept at both big picture thinking and day to day implementation of those thoughts. This is where the metaphor of the dance applies to Jodee's story. She sees strength in herself in being able to visualise the dancing in the ballroom as seen from a balcony above it, while at the same time being competent in guiding the step by step action of the dancers themselves on the dance floor. She perceives herself as being reflective in regard to her roles as educator and school principal and, using the words of one of her colleagues, 'dances through life like no-one's looking.' Furthermore, Jodee regards herself as being lucky or fortunate. Her daily motto for herself and some others close to her is 'Go Well, Go Shell', a corporate motto from her childhood, which encapsulates her sense of success, achievement and ambition. These and other aspects of Jodee's beliefs and practice will be referred to later in the chapter. Jodee, like all educational leaders, has

achieved much. This story could have been about those achievements. However, the decision was made to take another approach - that is to talk about Jodee as a person and as an educational leader, in the hope that the story plays some part in inspiring others to find their own niche, to lead, and have an impact, in both small and significant ways, on educational endeavour.



Background and context

As one would expect of any competent and skilled educational leader, Jodee Wilson's

*Jodee Wilson, Nixon Street Primary School,
Devonport, Tasmania.*

curriculum vitae is full and impressive. Her formal qualifications since leaving school in Devonport, a smallish city on Tasmania's north-west coast, began with a Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree, the requirements for which were completed at the end of 1981, when she was in her early 20s. This was followed closely by the award of a Tasmanian Teaching Certificate. In the mid '80s, Jodee completed about one half of the requirements for a Post Graduate Diploma in Special Education; took out a Master of Education degree, including a dissertation in the area of construction of gender, in 1997; and, in 2005, completed the requirements for a Graduate Certificate of Education in Leadership. All her tertiary studies have been with the University of Tasmania at Launceston or its antecedent bodies.

Like many current and aspiring educational leaders, Jodee's professional experience is a highlight of her curriculum vitae too. Following six years as a Grade 5/6 teacher (including some as a resource teacher across the Prep-Grade 6 spectrum), she moved quickly through the roles of Senior Teacher, Regional Consultant, Curriculum Officer across the north-west Tasmanian districts, State-wide Co-ordinator of the Supportive School Environment initiative, Acting Assistant Principal and Assistant Principal. This meant that, by 1998, some 16 years after commencing her teaching career, she was appointed Principal at Wesley Vale Primary School, located on the periphery of the city of Devonport. Jodee held this position until the end of 2004, when she won her current position as Principal of Nixon Street Primary School, Devonport (NSPS) which is one of the largest schools in Tasmania, with more than 700 students and over 60 adult personnel.

Jodee's formal studies, experience and professional learning have helped shape her as an educator, who demonstrates deep understanding of schools, schooling, education generally and the innovative practices within. She believes this understanding has enabled her to be alert to the demands of the future, which is to cater to the needs of learners in the 21st century.

Jodee has had many professional learning highlights. Their scope is impressive. Many of these activities are to do with educational leadership, but matters such as setting up the thinking classroom, promoting positive student behaviour, strategies for educational reform, and teaching for understanding, suggest that Jodee has engaged in a diverse range of formalised professional learning. However, as Jodee's story unfolds it becomes apparent that this is probably just the tip of the iceberg in regard to her ongoing growth and development as an educator and educational leader.

Nixon Street Primary School

Jodee has been the Principal of NSPS since the start of 2005, and said that 'there hasn't been time to do everything' in regard to improving the physical environment. Nevertheless, she had rearranged priorities to enable the oldest furniture in eight classrooms to be replaced, in order that 'our students have appropriate and aesthetically pleasing environments in which to work and learn.' Similarly, refocusing priorities led to a repainting of the foyers of both the administrative and early childhood sections of the school in bright, inviting, non-institutional colours. There was a definite purpose in having the same colours in both these sections – to symbolise the connectedness of the two sections and thus to help people perceive the Early Childhood section to be every

bit as important as the Primary section of the school. Furthermore, the new furniture for the Principal's office and the office of the Assistant Principal (Early Childhood) had symbolic purposes as well – the first, through the installation of a round table, for example, to establish a meeting environment, and the second to send a clear message about the perceived importance of the function of the Early Childhood section.

The Australian and NSPS flags are flying at full mast. There is a large sign by the front gate that displays the school's name and its visual logo or symbol, and a statement saying the school is a 'sun smart school'. There is a large expanse of well maintained grass, there's a very large adventure playground and a very attractive paved area, protected by shade cloth sails and featuring displays of roses and weeping cherry trees – the latter in their late autumn colours. Given the time of year, there are fallen leaves on the ground in this space and elsewhere, but not one example of rubbish. Classroom doors feature signs providing messages such as 'Welcome to 3-4 W, 2006' with a full list of students' names and the name of the teacher. There is a gymnasium with a very polite notice on the door saying, 'Please wipe your shoes, thank you'. School rules are displayed prominently, providing the message, 'Be safe, be respectful, be a learner'. All buildings are permanent and made of brick, and are well-maintained internally and externally. An extensive area of internal wall space outside an Assistant Principal's office displays a large number of framed photographs of individuals and groups from the past – Tasmanian representatives, house captains and prefects, band and choir members and so forth.

Jodee has a clear view that her actions must focus on improving children's circumstances and that they must attend to the needs of individual children. As an educational leader, Jodee claims to practice 'walking the talk' and identifies with Nelson Mandela's invitation to 'be what you want the world to become'. These beliefs are demonstrated when Jodee and another senior teacher undertake bus duty. This requires them to mark off names of children as they enter their bus. It turns out that one six year old girl is not present, but the bus driver waits while Jodee runs off. She returns with the tearful girl, who had experienced high drama of the sort little children encounter from time to time, and ensures she's settled on the bus. Order and organisation pervades the school where we know that chaos can reign.

Jodee's philosophy and beliefs about leadership and learning.

In telling her story here, we have attempted to make sense of it through identifying several imprecise and mutually overlapping organisers. Furthermore, we have used the powerful images and metaphors that permeate her conversations and which illuminate her unique leadership style.

A fortunate or lucky person

'Life's lucky for me. I'm open to opportunities as they arise and they seem to come my way.' That's how Jodee sums up her understanding of why she was nominated to be the subject of a chapter in this book. In return, I offer the well worn analogy of the champion golfer who, when described as being lucky, responded with the statement 'Yes, I certainly am, and the more I practise the luckier I get'. This brings a chuckle, and Jodee considers that perhaps she 'made her own luck' and that 'some mentors

were instrumental in this'. Jodee comments: 'Alan Larcombe was an authentic leader, who ignited my enthusiasm to lead. Perhaps not 'ignited' but 'encouraged'. I wanted the best for the students in my first school, which was certainly not an easy one, and Alan came along as Principal. He had a great capacity, as a leader, to give you a sense of what's required to lead. I and a number of colleagues owe a lot to Alan.' Another influential mentor was Carey McIver, the District Superintendent in Jodee's early years as Principal. 'He played a really wonderful role as a supportive critic in my development. Both Alan and Carey gave me an insight and made explicit to me the purpose or significance of being reflective.'

In response to my question, 'Who were your major cheerleaders?', she suggested, 'Probably Alan and Carey. I also have had a strong affinity with some significant leaders such as Terry Hynes (a well-known educator on the north-west coast of Tasmania and a former President of the Tasmanian Teachers' Federation) and Barry Smith (the Principal of NSPS when Jodee was an Assistant Principal at the school). They gave me opportunities to take risks, to learn from my successes, as well as from those that weren't always successful.'

More recently, Jodee's cheerleaders have been a group of colleagues who reached the principalship at about the same time. She remarks: 'We are a mutual admiration society. They are there to help celebrate the positives and the successes. I am fortunate to have their support also when the going gets a bit rough.'

Jodee's statement concerning luck or fortune continues: 'I'm fortunate, too, that Nic [spouse] is the person he is, as he organises our family and makes things in our lives run smoothly. He's a cheerleader for me and Mum's another. Sadly, Dad died when I was first at university. My parents were older than the parents of most of my peers, but they both had wisdom and insight into my individuality. They instilled a sense that I could do anything I wanted. Mum and Nic have always been there for me. Furthermore, adds Jodee, my two children, Clare and Luis, have been happy to make my workplace one of their playgrounds - they too are cheerleaders and inspire me.'

A personal vision made visible

Jodee was asked, in advance of our meeting, to think about a metaphor that encapsulated her 'as school principal'. She doesn't like 'principal as orchestral conductor' for example, since 'that's too upfront.' She thinks that 'principal as coach' and 'principal as cheerleader' go someway toward the heart of the matter. In the end, though, while Jodee accepts that one or more metaphors can be useful, she sees education and the principalship as being 'too multifaceted and complex to be summed up in a simplistic way.' However this has not stopped her from exploring the longstanding metaphor that has been shown, in the form of a logo, on Nixon Street Primary School's letterhead for many years. That logo is a lighthouse bordered by a circle. Jodee becomes quite animated when she describes how the usual entailments of 'a lighthouse' – danger, beware – are 'not helpful when describing education at NSPS. A lighthouse also protects people and shows the way to proceed safely.' She indicates that the lighthouse logo will be retained, but that she wants to work collaboratively with the community to rewrite the entailments of it, in order to capture how it symbolises the school's purpose currently and into the future.

At this moment in our discussion, Jodee moves to her desktop computer and starts a slide show she created. Before my eyes unfolds what I take to be Jodee's vision made visible – a vision for the children of NSPS and, indeed, the children and adolescents in the wider Devonport community. The beautiful and informative slide show is accompanied by a description of the lighthouse's purpose, its structure, its occupants and its beneficiaries. Jodee explains how the logo symbolises that the school is an integral part of the community and is a place for people. The sky:

Represents working towards a world class education system, while the grass represents the values and beliefs that underpin the new curriculum. The lighthouse symbolises the structures that are in place and the frameworks that are required in order to satisfy the occupants' needs.

Further, according to Jodee, the slide show describes how aligning the school's values, its purposes and its associated learning, teaching and assessment principles leads to improved schooling for all students. This is a highly professional illumination of her vision and she explains 'I see things in pictures, and think that others benefit from seeing pictures of the concepts that are in my head.' The slide show technique is used regularly in Jodee's presentations to various parent and professional audiences. Another presentation depicts a whole-school visit to Launceston to see the touring exhibition, *The French Masters*. This was used by her to explain to parents why the exercise was undertaken, what the outcomes were, and how the teachers' teaching, and children's work, depicted an innovative, valuable and unique learning experience.

Jodee's recognition, that she sees the world and learns about it in pictures, is critical to her story. As a student at school and an undergraduate, Jodee claims she was studious and tried hard, but felt neither well-connected to learning nor successful at it. She recalls being influenced greatly, in both positive and negative ways, by several key teachers. She knew at a relatively early age that she wanted to work with children, and therefore had to endure the journey if she were to achieve her goals. After a few years of teaching, she was introduced to ideas like 'educational kinesiology', to theories concerning different ways people learn (in particular the theories of Ned Hermann), and to the messages concerning multiple intelligences that emanated from Howard Gardner. These people gave her the frameworks and constructs to understand that she processes things in a holistic, global and conceptual way. At this stage in her development, Jodee knew she 'was on the right track' in regard to her personal learning and in terms of her teaching. Her challenge was, and continues to be, to meet the educational needs of all children in all groups by all teachers.

'When are we ever ready enough?'

The educational enterprise is highly complex, and Jodee uses the term 'chaos' frequently. She sees herself being somewhat 'eclectic' and certainly not 'machine-like' in her understanding or approach. While she admits she is competent in the 'technical' matters, such as planning, budgeting, scheduling and so forth, they are not her 'strong point' – certainly not as strong as identifying 'where we are going and what we have to do to get there.' Jodee sees herself, primarily, as a human resource 'facilitator', an educational 'expert' and a symbolic 'chief'.

So how does she think she goes about creating some sort of order, purpose and direction amid the chaos, given her strengths and weaknesses and the way she prefers to learn? This, it turns out, is no easy question to address. Clearly, there is little point in drawing on rational decision-making theories to make some sense of the ambiguities and uncertainties that abound in educational matters. In my conversation with Jodee, I draw on two writers from my past to see if we can find a way forward. The first was Charles Lindblom, who published a seminal article toward the end of the 1950s, titled *The science of 'muddling through'*. At the mention of the term muddling through, Jodee's face lights up and she agrees with this view. The second was Gifford Pinchot III, who published the book, *Intrapreneuring* in the mid-1980s. I explain that Pinchot argued that we break new ground by doing something, having fun, making mistakes, having more fun, doing something more, learning from mistakes and so on. To this, Jodee responds, 'Yes, that's it, that's the number, absolutely'. Here Jodee elaborates: 'We are in a serious business. I have fun, but the fun is in the muddling through.' She goes on to speak passionately about 'Doing the best we can. We might be able to do it better next year, but it's the best we can do now'. She explains this position in regard to being ready for a new reporting regime being introduced currently in Tasmania. When asked by others, 'Are you ready?' her response has been, 'We are ready enough right now. We need to have a go. We'll benefit from practice, from hindsight, from conversations and we'll improve. But we are as good as we are at the moment.'

Upon further reflection, Jodee rethinks the adequacy of the descriptor, 'muddling through': 'Perhaps this does not capture the strategic intent of doing it better. I think it's the bigger picture, the holistic vision that is strategic and purposeful, while the implementation at the nuts and bolts level may be more chaotic.' As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Jodee draws upon the metaphor of the balcony and dance floor to explain her insights. While she admits this is not her original way of describing matters, she finds it a powerful way of doing so.

Standing on the balcony you can see from a distance the magic of all the performers and their behaviours in the ballroom. You can get a sense of what is harmonising and what aspects need attention. You have the capacity to oversee the timing and the artistry. The strengths, as well as the weaknesses, are evident. However, while on the dance floor itself, you are in the depths of the action, of knowing your place, stepping on toes, avoiding some, connecting with others. You are consumed by the immediate next step. It's the balance of being able to keep sight of the two perspectives: the ability to live and be comfortable with the minute-to-minute action of the dance floor, while at the same time to have the balcony view that describes the broader and bigger direction.

Currently, Jodee is developing the dance floor metaphor further, both in terms of the over-arching balcony view and the hurly-burly of the dance floor itself. At the dance floor level, she explains that all 700 students at NSPS are engaged in grade level dance afternoons once a month under a program called 'Getting Together'. This appears to be yet another valuable and unique learning experience being developed at NSPS. Furthermore, she declares:

As a school we are developing the big idea of 'Interdependence Builds Community'. At the end of the year I am planning a whole-school dance

event – that is 700 students along with their families meeting on the soccer ground to demonstrate their dancing and celebrate coming together as a whole community.

Jodee explains further:

This is a practical example of the way I use metaphors to inform my practice. The dance event will bring the entire school community together, which links to developing the balcony view of what it means to be connected to, and within, the school community. It will create and reinforce relationships between all sections and elements within the immediate and wider school community. Given all this, I think the chapter heading, ‘Welcome to the dance’, is very apt indeed.

Balance between pressure and support

At the time of writing, Jodee had spoken about her nomination for inclusion in this book to just one person, other than those in her immediate family. This person is a young woman who came to one of Jodee’s former schools as a relief teacher, and who later took up a full-time appointment there. This teacher might be called one of Jodee’s protégés. It transpires that she was ‘squashed’ in a previous school where she was required to ask permission to do many things and had developed low self-esteem. She acted defensively in Jodee’s presence and admitted that she expected criticism for things she was doing. ‘It took a long time to build her up. But with coaching and support she has gone from strength to strength.’ Jodee is a mentor and cheerleader to this young teacher. ‘I honestly believe everyone comes to school to do the best they can – whether they are children or adults,’ explains Jodee. ‘I try to be strategic, to strike a balance between pressure and support so they can do their best – and I think I get that balance about right most of the time.’ There are a number of frameworks, including those concerned with curriculum and assessment ‘that make it easy for me to identify ways of helping those who aren’t doing their best. I work on the basis of, “What is it that you need, within the available frameworks, in order to be as good as you can be?”’

Jody states, ‘I do have power, as evidenced by the sign on my office door, but I don’t plan on being powerful.’ She also acknowledges that, generally, she is seen by others as having power as a consequence of her expertise in educational matters. ‘People will put in because they think I had a good idea. I might be at school at 6.00am doing something in regard to this good idea, and some others will turn up at that time too, because they know I’ll be working on that idea and will want to help.’ Her enthusiasm and drive to fulfil her vision, of ‘Everyone being all that they are capable of being’, appear to be relentless, and her passion and energy seem to be infectious.

Jodee believes that, in everything we do, the students have to be at the centre. ‘As a parent I want the best for my own children, and I use this as a guide to try to achieve the best for all children.’ She goes on:

I don’t want people always to be compliant. It’s not healthy to have a staff that agrees all the time. I want people to turn up and do the best they

can. It's OK for them to disagree and argue with me, but I will not accept obstructionist behaviour, incompetence, passive resistance or sabotage.

To Jodee, 'the biggest challenge is around managing the underperformance of staff.' She describes how she engages in such performance management through applying pressure to perform at the best one can while balancing this pressure with support, within identified frameworks.

This notion of 'support within frameworks' is an interesting one. The support isn't so much one of hand-holding, depicted by bland comments, such as, 'Of course you are making improvements – just keep working hard at your role. Practise makes perfect.' Rather, Jodee's strategy is largely of the sort where guidance is taken from a wide range of frameworks, basic to her 'educational repertoire'. These frameworks are based on a set of values and beliefs, drawn in part from current theories of teaching, learning practice, and leadership, that become organisers or tools for thinking and action. Thus, if a teacher is having difficulties in managing the behaviour of some children in class, Jodee will try to help find alternative ways of handling the situation, through a consideration of the 'supportive schools environment' material or other such frameworks. Similarly, if another teacher is having difficulty with a curriculum matter, such as some children in the class underperforming in regard to literacy and/or numeracy, Jodee's approach will be to work with that teacher to discover and adopt methods that are outlined in relevant curriculum documents or in the teacher's paradigm of understanding.

Jodee deplores demonstrations of 'helplessness' among her staff. 'I don't want people to ask for permission every time they want to try a new approach. I expect that policies and professionalism will be at the forefront and that people will work in the best interests of children. Constantly asking for permission is not a very healthy way for people to work. Furthermore, I want people to bring forward possible solutions, not just problems. We can then talk about those solutions and test them against a range of frameworks before we give it a go.'

Go well, go Shell

Jodee explains that, as a small child, she was apparently drawn to the bright yellow Shell company sign that was erected near her home. This was reinforced further by the knowledge that her father's brother was a senior executive with what was then Shell Australia. As a young child she interpreted this as, 'Uncle Don owning the shells.' At the time, Jodee's family didn't have a television set, but they visited an elderly lady on Sundays, who allowed them to watch her TV. Here appeared the 'shell' accompanied by the tagline, 'Go well, go Shell'. Over time, this became a family saying. It was 'a collective interpretation of the 60s advertisement which became a metaphor for life - i.e. making good, astute, considered choices or decisions, and working hard and smart to achieve your dreams and goals. All this makes for positive gains, outcomes and luck.' Jodee confesses that, 'being influenced by an emerging exposure to mass media and advertising may seem to be a bit tragic,' however she concludes that, 'Go well, go Shell has been a powerful driver in my life.'

Jodee carries this sort of symbolism over into her principalship. Her symbolism of the lighthouse portrays her desire to create a sense of community and a feeling of

connection and a sense of lifelong learning at NSPS. Another example of this is that 'I have insisted, with support from the parent association, that all students at NSPS wear their full uniform with pride. I think that this has been a powerful example of how, in a fairly short time, you can influence and establish a culture of belonging and identification.' Furthermore, she adds, 'this strategy has assisted with management of students' behaviour. We have conversations about appropriate behaviour and language and what it means to be a part of the community known as Nixon Street Primary School.' She elaborates further: 'We have a whole school focus and development of a through-line we call Interdependence Builds Communities, or in colloquial terms, 'getting connected'. This focus is a deliberate conversation in classrooms' as well as guiding professional conversations about unifying the school and its community.'

Conclusion

Jodee Wilson of Nixon Street Primary School in Tasmania, has made a major contribution to Australia through her educational leadership which may, together with the other stories told in this book, 'raise the esteem of the profession and highlight the great work of school principals.'

Jodee is obviously, an inspirational leader. She expresses what she does, and how she does it, using a variety of metaphors. She actually uses them as framework for planning and for action. Her metaphors, like the lighthouse, enshrine definite values, and she has a passion for leading using these values as her compass. 'Go well, go Shell' may be merely a slogan to many, but to Jodee it is a stimulus to seek and be the best, all in the interest of children in her care. Jodee has her frameworks for thinking, planning and for practice and these frameworks are inclusive and collaborative. She is both observer of and participant in, 'the dance' of educating all students in her school to reach their full potential in life.

Jodee believes that meaning is generated and transmitted largely through symbols, either visible or invisible. She sees symbolic aspects of schooling such as dancing, vision made visible, shells and a lighthouse, as central to her philosophy and practice as educational leader.

So has the story explained how Jodee has 'made a contribution to Australia through her educational leadership?' Hopefully so. Contributions to Australia can be made at many levels. Wise and powerful Ministers for Education can make a contribution. The well-meaning officials in various education offices can too. The 'expert' professors and lecturers in universities provide leadership that is absolutely necessary. The contributions of parents and the community more generally make contributions that cannot be done without. Children can make contributions too. However, the greatest contribution to Australia through education lies with teachers and those who lead them onto the dance floor. Principals like Jodee Wilson make a real difference.

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MARK DOECKE

It's All About Relationships

By Fiona Johnston

At Yirara College, the students constantly remind Mark Doecke that life is not about appearances, and that happiness does not equate to the accumulation of things: it is about relationships – ‘simple is good’. Everything about the students revolves around family – they will do anything for family; that is where community is. Sometimes it is frustrating for Mark that ‘blood is thicker than water’ but he also sees it as a reminder about family for the non-Indigenous world.

Mark is a Lutheran pastor and never intended to be a school principal. After completing his theological studies, he gained teaching qualifications so he could be a school chaplain. For several years he was a parish pastor and then was appointed as chaplain at Faith Lutheran Secondary School, a vibrant new school in the Barossa Valley in South Australia, where he was part of the leadership team. After six years at the school, Mark was invited by the Lutheran church to take up the position of principal at Yirara College. He knew nothing at all about Aboriginal education but felt a strong sense of ‘calling’ and was excited by the challenge. ‘So in 1994, at the age of 34, I found myself principal of Yirara!’



Yirara College

Yirara College is an Indigenous, co-educational, Christian, boarding school for post-primary students from remote communities in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. The College stands on spacious grounds, seven kilometres from Alice Springs, between the town and the airport. The name Yirara is the Arrernte name for a creek, which lies between the College and the community called Amoonguna. The Yirara College colours are black, gold and red.

Mark Doecke, Yirara College, Alice Springs, Northern Territory.

The College was originally established as a government school in 1973, but at the request of Aboriginal people, in 1993 the government handed it to the Finke River Mission, part of the Lutheran Church in Australia. The broad objective of the College is to provide traditional young people with an academic and social experience that will equip them to operate effectively in the non-Indigenous domain. English literacy is regarded as the key to achieving this objective.

The students

There are around 200 students at Yirara College, aged from 12 to their late teens, from thirty remote communities in central Australia. The main languages spoken by the students are dialects of Arrernte, Warlpiri, Luritja, Pitjantjatjara, Anmatyere, Alyawarra and Kriol. Students are encouraged to value their traditional knowledge and culture, while incorporating new skills and understandings. Family and community meetings are held at Yirara and parents and family members are involved in the Governing Council of the College. Many of the students come in with low literacy, but if they stay, they learn quickly; something from which Mark, as the principal, has gained much satisfaction.

Mark regards Indigenous education as a huge challenge, especially in relation to student attendance and retention. Many students simply cannot sustain being away from home and their relatives for more than a few weeks. Given the poor attendance patterns, it is difficult to get any continuity in teaching programs. His staff may be doing well with a student but then the student may not come back to school after a break. Yet it is more complex than that. 'It's hard when you put your heart and soul into these kids and enjoy your relationships with them. And you might see them again or you might not.'

Mark is somewhat disappointed that the Aboriginal parents in his school do not seem to have fully embraced the value of education for their children so as to allow them to have careers and take their place in the workforce. The College has not grown in student numbers in his time as principal. To sustain an enrolment of 200, the College works with around 380 students each year. Mark had hoped that, with committed staff, good academic programs and a rich social life in the boarding houses, it would be enough to retain the students. The irony is that, with better equipped and skilled staff, many who have been at the College a long time, and better resources, the same problems, issues and challenges that were being dealt with twelve years ago, are still high on the agenda. Mark sees this as partly due to increasing social dysfunction and upheaval among Indigenous families in remote communities. When he was first at the College, the majority of students came from 'whole', functional families with good support structures, but now families are more likely to be severely affected by violence, abuse, substance abuse and mental breakdown. 'If it wasn't for the quality of our staff and school leaders, we would be going backwards in terms of academic outcomes, retention of students and retention of staff', says Mark.

The staff

At Yirara College, there are around 60 full-time equivalent staff, including 20 teachers, a half-time tutor in every class, part-time homework tutors and boarding staff, house

parents, maintenance and administration staff. The cleaning, laundry and food services are contracted out. The College is fully funded by the Federal government, with a budget of around \$6 million a year.

Mark arrived at the College a year after it changed from being a government school and when most of the teachers were newly appointed. Coming from a new school with strong staff morale and focus, Mark was drawn to the challenge of working with Yirara staff who had come from all over Australia, with different backgrounds and some with no experience in Indigenous education. He was fortunate to have a deputy principal, who was both a linguist and teacher, who had lived in Indigenous communities for years and spoke several western desert languages. Mark wondered why the deputy was not the principal of Yirara, but was told the deputy was needed 'in the trenches' and much of Mark's work would initially be in staff management and liaison with government.

For Mark's first three years as principal, he and the staff relied strongly on the deputy's advice, but when the deputy left, Mark's 'apprenticeship' was over and it was time for him to become far more involved with the students and their families, as well as maintain his other responsibilities.

One of Mark's expectations at Yirara College, which has largely been met, was to develop the school's expertise in Indigenous education, beginning with attracting high quality staff. Mark has immense respect for his staff, some of whom are his 'heroes', and without them he could not run the College. When he conducts interviews for new members of staff, he doesn't 'dress the place up'. He explains both the harsh reality and that 'the kids are lots of fun'. At Yirara, a lot of time, money and physical resources are spent on induction programs for new staff, and on continued mentoring and support structures around cultural perspectives and behaviour management. Mark does not want to lose teachers and the effort taken seems to work, as staff retention rates compare well with other Alice Springs secondary schools. The best aspect of the job for Mark is working with his highly skilled and committed staff, from whom he constantly learns. He is in awe of how they relate to the students, their extraordinary dedication and their level of skills in areas such as English literacy.

Although it took Mark longer than he expected to achieve a strong commonality of purpose among his staff, in a recent survey of staff morale in Lutheran church schools across Australia, Yirara College received the highest rating. This was supported by people's comments to Mark that Yirara staff appeared to have a strong sense of purpose, whilst also enjoying themselves.

However, in his early years as principal, Mark had to deal with some staff, who had their own agendas and wanted to liberalise the College. He acknowledges that Yirara College is a conservative school in terms of rules and expected behaviours. Occasionally, he has had to discipline and dismiss staff and he finds this one of the worst aspects of his job. He says that, 'Some people think these things shouldn't happen in a church school.'

Mark describes the College as 'a tight ship with a lot of rules and we do the same thing all the time, such as walking the students in orderly lines to their classes'. He explains that this is about giving the students security and predictability in a context which is foreign to them. Because English is a second or third language for the

students, they often have difficulty understanding the intent and meaning of written rules. The College has a strong anti-bullying and anti-harassment policy. Some of the rules are aimed at building a positive environment and at preventing teasing, which is a characteristic of many Aboriginal families and communities, and which can cause major fights if it goes across language lines or country groups.

Mark and his staff are committed to the wellbeing of all the students in the college. They are rostered to search for students, who have run away or left the grounds, often with family, without permission from the College. Mark is on the roster one night a week and one weekend in three, during which time he spends many hours going from house to house, camp to camp, talking to families. Girls are particularly in danger through walking the streets at night. Also, after Saturday morning shopping, up to a dozen students may not return to the College, possibly after having met up with family, or because of feeling homesick, or of wanting money. 'I run down the Todd River chasing kids – it's a bit of a game sometimes and can be quite amusing.' Sometimes, there may be something seriously wrong, like teasing at school or a death in the family; looking for the students and encouraging them to talk about their problems are ways that Mark demonstrates care for the students.

Yirara College life

The educational program of Yirara College consists of two parts: an academic program carried out in the day school, and a less formal program, carried out predominantly in the boarding house. Most students are studying the Northern Territory's approved curriculum for secondary-aged students up to Year 10, plus intensive literacy and numeracy and Australian Indigenous Language Programs.

Every school day begins with chapel, followed by announcements. On Fridays, a longer assembly is held, at which Mark, or another staff member, gives a talk and awards are given. This daily time, of the whole school coming together is important for the staff and students. The giving of awards aims at building both the self esteem and confidence of performing students, as well as providing models for students.

Yirara is a 24-hour-seven-days-per-week boarding school. There are many sub-groups in the dormitories and after school co-curricular activities include sport, craft and music. The students learn keyboard, guitar, bass and drums and enjoy performing in boys' and girls' bands. On the weekend, the social program includes bush trips, camping, swimming, football, horse riding, and shopping. There is a disco and dinner on the last day of each term when staff and students dress up and a prize is awarded for the 'best dressed'. At the same time, the College aims to acknowledge and respect the values, social mores and world view of Aboriginal society, in particular their language, kinship structures, traditional law and customs, and norms of behaviour and interaction.

Mark enjoys the cross-cultural aspect of his job and especially delights in the quirky sense of humour of the students. 'Even after twelve years here, and learning an Aboriginal language, the kids still surprise me from a cultural perspective. So it constantly keeps me on my toes.' One of the ways staff morale remains high, even when things are most difficult, is through sharing stories about what the kids have done. 'And they must surely laugh at us "whitefellas"'. I'm convinced that they sometimes

think what we do is crazy!’

Hope for the future

Mark’s experience is that many policy makers and educators are looking for ‘quick fix’ solutions in Indigenous education, yet these are not there. Much of his work involves contact with the DEST about funding, about the school’s performance and expertise in Indigenous education, and he has met with a number of Federal Ministers for Education. ‘Somehow you have to say to them, there is no quick fix, yet at the same time, we’re doing well, there is hope.’ Mark experiences Indigenous education as highly politicised and he is often asked for his opinion by the media. He finds that people have strong views about Indigenous affairs. For example, people in Alice Springs see the students on Saturday mornings in town looking ‘spick and span’ and say, ‘that’s how we want our Aborigines to look’ and others say, ‘Oh, those Aboriginal kids, they get everything, free education, free this and that...’. Mark says, ‘you just can’t win.’

In recent years, through his membership of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, Mark has experienced a lot of goodwill towards Aboriginal people. Principals are keen for their students to learn about Indigenous Australia and to fully appreciate the complexity of the issues and challenges. Mark has spoken at conferences and gatherings of principals and has established student exchange programs. One such program was with Concordia College, a Lutheran school in Adelaide. Yirara College invited Concordia media students to produce a promotional DVD about Yirara. Six students from each of the two schools spent two weeks filming and conducting interviews, including a musical clip of Yirara students performing in a band and singing a song written by one of the staff members. It was an exciting collaboration. It enhanced mutual understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Learning from living at Docker River

In 1998, Mark took 15 months leave from Yirara College to live at Docker River, a Pitjantjatjara-speaking community, 230 kilometres west of Ayers Rock, near the Western Australia border. He felt that he needed to learn an Aboriginal language and gain some first hand experience of remote community life. He moved there with his family and took on the teacher-linguist position in the bilingual primary school. Every weekend he went on field trips, mostly with older Aboriginal people, some of whom could remember when they first saw white people. As the teacher-linguist, Mark had a good excuse to talk to the people in their language and write their stories down. He learnt Pitjantjatjara fairly well and, when he returned from Docker River, the people would only talk to him ‘in language’. ‘Unfortunately I don’t have much opportunity to practice Pitjantjatjara. The kids are too shy to talk to me ‘in language’ and they wonder why ‘whitefellas’ talk it anyway.’ Mark teaches reading and writing of Pitjantjatjara in the College’s vernacular literacy classes, where students learn to read and write in their language.

Based on his learning at Docker River, Mark wrote a report to the Yirara staff, titled

Fifteen Months in Five Minutes, outlining some of his learning. The following points are taken from this report.

Mark suggests that places like Yirara College are very important for young Indigenous people as they provide a safe, well-ordered, predictable, Christian place from which young people can learn about the non-Aboriginal world – a world that is changing so much. ‘Aboriginal parents, family and community are rarely in a position to do for their kids what Yirara potentially can, when it comes to learning about how to live in non-Aboriginal, mainstream society.’

For Mark, there are no easy or simple solutions to Aboriginal education, particularly attendance at school. ‘I think Yirara is basically on the right track – but there is always a need for us to try to improve what we do and examine honestly the way we operate. I believe that has constantly happened here since Finke River Mission took over management but we can always do more’.

Mark believes that, as an educational leader in Yirara College, he should never lower his standards. ‘You need to keep your expectations high, but explain, explain, explain, and when kids fail to meet those expectations forgive, forgive, forgive, and be patient. And explain again... And do it all with Christian love.’

From his experience at Docker River, Mark saw the need to make Yirara a friendlier place for Aboriginal people:

One of my hopes for the College is that Aboriginal people will feel free to visit, chat, perhaps offer their services for some paid or unpaid work, and that we can accommodate that, as inconvenient as it may be. Yes, there will be tensions. For example, the needs of family versus the need for education and for the right behaviour. But let us not flee from those tensions, but deal with them in a spirit of openness and love, without compromising our values and beliefs. For it is our strong values and beliefs that are our strength.

He believes that at Yirara College they should teach students how to be respectful with white people. ‘That’s why the courtesies of please and thank you and other examples of good manners are so important. We are not turning our kids into ‘whitefellas’. We are helping them live comfortably in a society foreign to them.’

Dependence versus independence is also an issue for Mark as he explains:

For too long, government policies and the practices of ‘whitefellas’ in communities have made Aboriginal people dependent on ‘whitefellas’. Whatever we do here at Yirara, we should keep asking ourselves the question, ‘Will this help the kids to become more dependent on us or independent in the long run?’ Let’s have a few think-tanks on how we can encourage independence.

Mark believes that the college needs to teach the students practical living skills – money management, how to rent, buy, cook, look after things and self – ‘the very stuff we often take for granted, growing up in mainstream society, in homes with parents who are able to teach us these things, (much of it by example)’. Also, he suggests that we should not overestimate the

...importance of what we do with the students compared with what we are to the students. Focus on the individual, not the mass. Work and think and speak to them in love. This does not contradict good standards or discipline. In fact, both of these things, rightly administered, reinforce their security and that we really do love them.

A major challenge in Indigenous communities is that, in many instances, families are breaking down.

Kids increasingly do not listen to their family and elders. Let's think about how we can support families, including obligations. Aboriginal elders out there are frustrated and sad because no longer do the young people listen to them. You need to watch out for anything that you do or say that might be contributing in some small way to that breakdown. Remember, if people do not listen to their family and elders they will not listen to any other authority.

For Mark and Yirara it is important to continue to teach and model the value of hard work:

Out bush, I saw old people, who would walk all day across hot spinifex and sand to catch one goanna or find a few witchetty grubs to give to their grandchildren. But their grandchildren and children would not even lift a finger to help their older relatives pick gumnuts from a high tree to make a necklace. These older people I spent a lot of time with were not afraid of hard work. Their children and grandchildren increasingly have no clue as to what work is. What can we do at Yirara to uphold the value of work?

In the report about his experiences at Docker River, Mark concluded, 'These people are far more tolerant of the mistakes of "whitefellas" than we are of theirs. Christian patience, understanding and forgiveness by us are so important at a place like Yirara.'

Post-Docker River leadership

Before Mark returned from Docker River, the acting principal and the Chair of the College Board met with him and suggested that he needed to change his leadership style to be more consultative with staff, in line with the style of the popular acting principal. It was a humbling and painful experience for him. But he changed and now talks about 'pre-Docker River' and 'post-Docker River'. Mark involves many more people, and not just school leaders, in decision-making. He is more willing to take risks and let staff take risks. He is also more willing to let people run with their ideas, as long as they keep him informed, and to back them up should they need it.

After Docker River, Mark had a better understanding of the importance of relationships – both from his remote community experience and from how the leadership in the College changed in his absence. He was challenged by the issue of dependence versus independence in relationships. Independence and leadership are encouraged among the older students at Yirara and it is happening slowly but 'not

as fast as ‘whitefellas’ would like it to happen’. Also it is hard for students to take responsibility for their own learning because they lack confidence and need support and scaffolding for what they do. But some members of staff are working one-on-one with students and Mark believes he can see considerable progress.

There has been some success with mentoring in the College. A 22 year old student has been gradually mentored by staff and is now a leader in the school. She works part-time out of the school while also doing her Senior Certificate. Her unofficial role in the school is ‘big sister to the younger kids’. Her cousin, a 19 year old male student, also has a strong influence on the younger students. Mark sees such success as being ‘all about long-term relationships’. Some teachers have been at the school for a long time, and as students trust them, they are able to take the students home for weekends, or take them out at night to experience the wider, mainstream world.

Building on successes: Recent initiatives

Recently, the College has expanded to deliver courses on-site at Aboriginal communities, to support students who find it hard to sustain a full school term away from home. A secondary campus was opened in 2005 at Kintore (Walungurru), a remote community 500 kilometres west of Alice Springs, after twelve months of discussion between the local community, council, primary school and Yirara. The College also has a mobile classroom for teaching secondary aged students in some of the small feeder communities for limited periods of time, and there is currently a teacher at Willowra, a remote location 340 kilometres from Alice Springs.

In 1998 a girls’ camping area was established on a site adjacent to the College which is sacred to women and cannot be visited by men. The site includes camp fire areas, river sand for camping out, shade structures, an ablution block and recreational facilities. The campsite is used most weekends during the warmer months by the various girls’ dormitories and for afternoon activities throughout the year. The girls love the opportunity to camp out and cook kangaroo tail over a camp fire. In 2005, the girls’ camping area received a national award for innovation in boarding schools.

One of Mark’s hopes when he arrived at the College was that there would be less substance abuse if the students stayed longer at school. Unfortunately, there seems to be more petrol sniffing now than ever and more alcoholism among many families and ex-students. Since 2003, staff have been trying to help young people caught up in petrol sniffing to return to school, and, as part of this program, Yirara leased an outstation, called No. 3 Bore, for students at risk. In 2005, the College, together with its ‘partner’, BP Australia, won a Prime Minister’s award for community/business partnerships for trying to help these students at risk. Obviously, there is still some way to go, but Yirara College will continue to live its values and make a difference in the lives of these young people.

Values and beliefs are the key

Mark believes in empowering staff, taking risks and trusting people to do their job. He knows he was not particularly good at this in his first years at the College, but he has learned from his experience. As a Lutheran pastor in a Christian school, he has strong Christian values, which underpin everything he believes in and does. He also

understands that people make mistakes and fall short of their ideals. He is a strong believer in forgiveness and hopes for the same in others when he lets them down. Mark feels blessed with the gift to forgive and largely forget and this has helped him through difficult times with staff and students. He is also a strong believer in being open and honest. If issues arise with staff, he addresses them. He shares information and encourages staff. He affirms his staff publicly and finds opportunities for celebration, and they laugh together.

Since Mark has returned from Docker River, he takes himself less seriously. He says he has learnt the Australian characteristic of being a bit self deprecating and thinks that it is good for leaders to not be afraid to be human. 'There are times when you feel things are really bad, but you have to present that stoic front and be optimistic. There are also times when you don't. I've been emotionally vulnerable in front of staff and I think it's made it easier for others to be vulnerable.' Mark believes in staff sharing their burdens with each other, and Yirara being a place of support for everyone. 'We are good at that. I like to think of us as that sort of community.'

Yirara College is a place where staff can be themselves. If someone is leaving and tells Mark, 'Yirara was good because I could be myself', he feels pleased. He also believes strongly in professional development and learning. One of Mark's mantras when he employs staff is, 'Don't tell me what you can do, tell me who you are.' He looks for staff who are open to change and learning, who know themselves and are secure and honest within themselves. It is important that staff can give without receiving, and go that 'extra mile.'

Personal and professional life

Mark regards himself as hyperactive and constantly in need of challenges. But he is never bored in this job. Although sometimes stressed and overworked, he is mostly kept busy and challenged enough, but not so much that it defeats him. 'But you do have days when you feel you've got rocks in your guts, because kids, who are doing so well, haven't come back.'

Mark is sustained professionally by his leadership staff and some outside colleagues such as Chris Tudor, the principal of St Phillip's College in Alice Springs, who is a long-term friend and inspiration. However, most of his support comes from inside the College rather than outside and he sees no point in complaining about not having enough outside support. 'You've just got to go out and make things happen.' He attends conferences and finds them inspiring and does a lot of reading.

Leadership means 'making a difference'

Mark is not planning on leaving Yirara College for a while. He is aware of the extent of learning and commitment required to do his job well, but at the same time regards himself as part of a good team, which now runs the College. 'I'd say to anyone coming into this job that they have to be committed to a long stay if they're going to make a difference. You can't just walk in and manage it like anywhere else. There's just so much to learn.'

Mark believes that he has learned a lot from his experiences, including his

mistakes. If he was asked for advice from an aspiring principal, Mark would say that it doesn't matter if you don't know everything or have all the skills. Instead, you need to surround yourself with people who do have those skills, listen to and learn from them. You need to be humble enough to ask them, 'What do you think I should do?' It's all about good teams, surrounding yourself with the right people and drawing from the gifts that they have.

A highlight for Mark has been participating in building the special community of staff and students at Yirara, and watching it gradually take shape. He is proud of the clear direction and focus in the College. It is a place where most people know their tasks and their place, and know where they are trying to go, 'even if we struggle to get there!' Mark believes it is a place where people feel secure – life is ordered, predictable, but still full of fun and challenges.

Mark believes that being a principal in a college that educates indigenous children is a challenging job, but it is a very rewarding one. He is convinced that the greatest challenges can be overcome when staff members work together as a team, and when all members of the school community have a deep sense of respect for one another and support one another. In the end, however, the greatest reward comes from knowing that you have made a difference in transforming the lives of young Indigenous people, thereby helping prepare them for the challenges outside the college, now and into the future. And in trying to achieve this, 'It's all about relationships.'

LEE CALLUM**Individual Pathways to the Future:
Not Just an Intellectual Journey**

By Robyn Collins

Upper Coomera State College sits on a hill, in an area designated the ‘Gold Coast Innovation Corridor’, surrounded by new housing developments and in close proximity to three other schools, two independent and one Catholic. Almost directly opposite the school, Dreamworld looms over the Brisbane to Gold Coast highway, while Movie World and Seaworld are in close proximity. The fact that the school is in the Innovation Corridor means that it is encouraged to partner with local industry, and to maximise the opportunities made possible by its location – but more of that later.

The college draws its students from disparate socio-economic levels, inclusive of professional families with high aspirations through to long-term multi-generational unemployed families, who seek the ‘good life’ of the Gold Coast from interstate and abroad.

A high percentage of students present with lower than average literacy and numeracy levels on enrolment, with many students having serious learning difficulties. The college has a rapidly growing Special Education Unit with more than 90 students currently supported, and it is anticipated that within a year the unit will be the largest in Queensland. A highly transient student population, lack of community facilities, and lack of local transport are also concerns for the college staff.



When Lee Callum first saw the school site, it was an empty paddock, with no buildings, few trees and no community infrastructure. There were two relatively new, successful, independent schools nearby and a new Catholic school was planned. Although the college was master planned by an architect, Lee had virtually no input into what ‘her’ school would look like, but

*Lee Callum, Upper Coomera State College,
Gold Coast, Queensland.*

she was quite clear about what she wanted to achieve for the school, the students and the community.

It was in this context, that Lee arrived at Upper Coomera State College as foundation principal.

The principal's background

Lee Callum's passion for education is contagious. When you first meet Lee she glows with energy and the excitement of doing a job she loves. She talks quickly, as if there is not enough time to tell you about everything that is important to her, and you suspect she lives her life this way as well – quickly, enthusiastically, always looking for the next challenge.

The same glow is evident when she talks about her life away from work. Her engineer husband and two teenage sons are obviously extremely important to her and she works hard to balance her life between work and family, and doing things she enjoys, such as playing club hockey, running with her sons and husband, going to the gym, sailing in the Whitsundays, snow skiing and looking after the family pets – a dog, a cat and three guinea pigs.

Despite her commitment to education, Lee did not, on graduation from secondary school, go immediately into teaching. Instead she took a three year 'detour', working in the banking industry and then heading overseas, spending part of her time living on a kibbutz in Israel. It was here that her passion for teaching was confirmed, and on her return to Australia she began studying for a Diploma in Teaching, followed later by a Bachelor of Education, and then a Master of Education Studies.

In 1986, she began her teaching career at a large urban school in a low socio-economic area. Within two years, and almost by accident, she was principal of a one-teacher rural school. Lee's 'accidental' step towards principalship occurred when, in her second year of teaching, she wanted her second year inspection early. She discovered that if she applied to be a principal of a small school, the second year inspection would occur at the same time, and it would be early rather than late in the year, so she and a colleague applied. Initially this was the only reason for her application, and she fully intended to withdraw following the inspection; instead, she became more and more interested in the idea of running her own school and, thus, found herself as principal of a one teacher school in her third year of service.

In 2003, Lee was appointed foundation principal of Upper Coomera State College. Between her first appointment in 1986 and the Upper Coomera appointment, she was principal of a rural three-teacher school; principal of two large urban primary schools; an Acting Review Officer, supporting schools with their triennial reviews and strategic development; and the project manager responsible for developing private-public partnerships to establish a large new urban P-12 college.

The journey to Coomera allowed Lee to gain experience in primary and secondary education, special education and in working with English as Second Language speakers. It provided opportunities to work with private industry, to negotiate and support the local community when plans were made for the controversial takeover of school land to extend the 'Gabba cricket grounds', and to work with school stakeholders in the amalgamation of an infant and primary school. Finally, it gave her the passion for

education and life that marks her principalship and is mentioned over and over by people who work with her.

The vision

In 2003, 900 students from preschool to year 8, enrolled at Upper Coomera State College. In 2007, there will be over 2,700 students, making it the largest school in Queensland. Right from the beginning, Lee was aware of the planned growth for the school and of the challenges she would face in managing this growth. She also knew that the vision she had for the school was going to challenge the traditional delivery of education. If she was going to succeed she had to build strong relationships between parents, staff and students. She was determined, however, that all children in her care would have the chance to fulfil their potential and have access to an educational program to meet their needs; and that they would be supported by school staff, parents and the wider community.

For Lee, words like ‘potential’ and ‘needs’ were not just clichés; they were central to her vision and to what she wanted to achieve, and so she set about drawing everyone into the vision, using three major strategies.

Firstly, she wanted to ensure that the school maintained a close ‘community’ feel but that every student was treated as an individual. The strategy for doing this was ‘the journey concept,’ that provided individual pathways to the future for every student and every staff member. The central idea was that everyone in the school was on a different, as well as a shared, journey, and they would feel good about their journey at each point in time. To make this happen, each student was guaranteed personal attention from one or more trusted adults, who took responsibility to keep the journey on track, act as mentor and confidante when required, and assist in plotting ‘the individual pathway to the future’. Everything was about making each child’s journey as positive and rewarding as possible.

Secondly, she wanted to be sure that her vision was ‘owned’ by the school community. In this regard, she quotes the words of philosopher Lao-Tzu, the father of Taoism:

*As for the best leaders,
The people do not notice their existence.
The next best, the people honour and praise.
The next, people fear;
And the next, the people hate.
When the best leader’s work is done,
The people say, ‘We did it ourselves.’*

To ensure the vision belonged to the school community, every step forward was decided through consultation. Attention was given to the smallest, as well as the larger issues. For example, feedback from parents indicated that they did not want their children to be constantly nagged about uniform, so parents, students and staff worked together to design a uniform incorporating a style of shirt that did not need to be tucked in.

Similarly, when the Queensland government passed legislation to change

requirements for senior schooling in Queensland, Lee realised immediately that the school would have to make changes to respond to the legislation. Briefly, the legislation required that, from 1 January 2006, young people had to stay at school until they turned 16 or completed Year 10, whichever came first. After this, the compulsory participation phase applied until the young person:

- gained a Senior Certificate or Certificate III (vocational qualification);
- participated in eligible options for two years, where an eligible option is an educational program provided by a school, a course of higher education provided by a university or other provider, a TAFE course, an apprenticeship or traineeship; or,
- turned 17.

Parents are obliged to ensure their child participates as required, unless the young person has an exemption or is in a paid job for at least 25 hours per week. Lee decided one of the efficient ways to deal with the requirements was to change the Senior School hours to between 7.45 am and 1.30 pm. Obviously, community consultation was critical for such a major change. Initially some parents were outraged that their children would have to be up at 5.30 am, bus companies were uncooperative and staff members were doubtful. Now the timetable change is universally applauded: students are able to undertake part-time work, part-time traineeships and apprenticeships, or complete their homework at school, without impacting on their 'traditional' education program; students are fresh and on-track; facility demand has reduced; and, staff are able to access shared planning time and balance family life and work.

To reach this point was not simply a matter of instituting a change and hoping for the best. Early and ongoing consultation was vital during the research and introduction phase. A range of forums both at night and during the day, enabled parents, staff and students to bring the full range of issues to the table. Working parties then looked at the positives and negatives and brainstormed possible solutions. The bus company was the key to addressing the concerns of the community. Many meetings later, helped by a persuasive 'never say never Lee Callum', solutions were found for the bus company and a flexible approach to staffing was the solution to teacher concerns about early rising and the needs of their own young children.

To further enshrine the ownership of the vision, Lee consulted with staff and the community to develop her 'teams within teams' concept, an initiative that would ensure the close personal attention she wanted for her students, and the long-term relationships between students and staff, which research told her was critical to student success. This was reinforced by feedback from parents who said they wanted their child to 'be treated as an individual' and to come to school 'to enjoy it'.

Over time, and with constant consultation, the concept of individual attention and close relationships became 'three sub-schools and four stages': Stage A, Years P-3 and Stage B; Years 4-6, became the Chisholm Junior School; Stage C, and sub-school two, Years 7-9, became Jakaara Middle School; and Years 10-12 became Fensham Senior School.

Within each sub-school the 'team within teams' concept means that four teachers work with the same group of 100 students over three years. This allows teachers to build strong relationships with the students and their families and reduces 'down time'

at the beginning and end of each year as relationships are already established. Teams are constructed, predominantly, on teacher preference, with all staff asked in term three who they would like to work with and in which stage. Staff preferences are then balanced by school needs and also to ensure a balance of experienced and graduate teachers. This is particularly important, because Upper Coomera State College has amongst its 140 teachers a higher percentage than average of recent graduates.

One of the roles of the team is to assess the literacy and numeracy abilities of new students. In 2007 this assessment will extend to technology skills. Students are then placed in 'journey groups' for literacy and numeracy ability from Year 2 onwards. The literacy group is also the student's home group. In Stages A and B, students undertake two hours of literacy, one hour of numeracy and one hour of 'connected curriculum' (trans-disciplinary studies), per day. In Stage C, this becomes one hour each of literacy and numeracy and one and a half hours per day of connected curriculum. In the Senior stage, home teachers take on the added responsibility for career and academic planning for each student in their care over the three-year period.

The third strategy to achieve the vision and add another layer to the teams' concept is leadership 'spreading'. Each Teaching Professional Team (TPT) has a leader (TPT Leader) who meets fortnightly with the college dean to discuss continuous improvement and triumphs. The creation of leadership density assists the maintenance of communication in this large educational community. The most important role of the TPT Leader is chairing the weekly TPT meeting, where the agenda is focused on pedagogy issues, such as effective teaching, learning conversations about lessons, resources, assessment and moderation. Teachers are encouraged to think of solutions that are 'out of the box' and based on sound research. The professional learning community which evolves is based on Lee's belief in the importance of teachers supporting teachers, and is a vital part of the college's support program for all teachers, particularly graduate teachers, and of Lee's commitments to building a culture of shared leadership in her school.

The leadership strength of the school has been further enriched in 2006 with the introduction of a new challenge - what Lee calls 'going to the next level of leadership' - to encourage every member of school staff to be 'a leader in something', and for all members of staff to support each other in their leadership roles. Thus, one administration officer has chosen to be leader of enrolment processes, with the role of making the school's enrolment processes the best they can be. This role ranges from walking through the school's front gates to observe how welcoming the entrance is, to reviewing the school's communication strategy, including the college web site; all to ensure the enrolment process is as pleasant and 'user friendly' as possible.

Lee believes all teachers have an area of interest and passion that can give something extra and wonderful to a school community. Whether it is taking a literacy circle in the library at lunchtime for advanced readers, establishing a theatre sports group, or introducing a new sporting activity, each teacher is able to display leadership. One of the most satisfying moments for Lee is when a teacher tells her, 'I didn't know I could be a leader in the school and make such a difference'.

In addition, leadership is spread by ensuring all Heads of Department (HODs) have P-12 responsibility. HODs work with Stage representatives to develop the strategic

vision for the department, ensure effective scaffolding, avoid unnecessary duplication, make appropriate decisions about resourcing, and so on.

Leadership is also central in the school's commitment to succession planning, with every staff member in a formal leadership position involved in work-shadowing. During the initial phase, the shadow is released from normal responsibilities for a day to work with another staff member to develop an understanding of the role. From then on the staff member and shadow meet once per month. The shadow steps into the position if the staff member is away. In this way Lee believes she can be sure, 'if I get run over by a bus, the school continues on its journey'.

For the senior administration team, the emphasis is on supporting the classroom teacher to make a difference. As Lee puts it, 'It's a journey and we all have a part in the journey. This means finding the best facilities, the best processes, the best practices so that teachers in the classroom can do their work to achieve the best for their students'.

'Being the best you can be'

Lee sees her role as communicating her passion for the college to all members of staff. Her vision is ambitious – she wants Upper Coomera State College to be the 'best school in Australia', and she makes no apology for being up front about this, suggesting that schools are far too coy about stating their ambitions. It is accepted as a matter of course that athletes, or artists or footballers are encouraged to be the best they can be; Lee wants schools to feel the same way. The constant questions at Upper Coomera State College are: What does being the best we can be actually mean? What does it look like? What do we see? As Lee states:

This is not about being better than the school down the road; it is about being the best school we can be for our students. It's about distance travelled and value-adding for each individual child. It's about producing happy children and opening doors for them that wouldn't otherwise be opened.

Lee meets formally with each of the principals of the three sub-schools once per week, with Deputy Principals once per month and Heads of Department and teaching teams once per term. The staff refer to these as 'journey progress meetings' where the emphasis is on how the college is travelling. The questions are always the same: What's working well at the college? Your sub-school? Your Stage? This total focus on the journey allows everyone in the school community to connect and be 'on the same page'.

At the same time, student progress is tracked using extensive data, consisting of tables and graphs showing student progress towards learning outcomes. The data clearly help staff reflect on the journeys of individuals, groups of students, classes of students and cohorts. Here the questions asked encompass all students: What is the journey for our struggling students? Our very capable students? And for all the others along the continuum?

The college's emphasis on literacy, numeracy, science, e-learning and the 'whole child' allows staff to determine where they have taken each individual and to use this information, and their dedication and knowledge, to continually lift outcomes and

meet the next challenge. Lifting the benchmarks for struggling students is exciting and a cause for celebration; however, school staff never lose sight of what is happening to every student in their care.

Lee's philosophy on leadership

When you ask people who work with Lee for feedback about her leadership, the words mentioned over and over are 'passionate', 'emotional', 'diligent', 'devoted', 'intelligent', 'energetic', 'committed' and 'professional'. They also mention the fact that she 'thinks outside the box' and encourages others to do the same. A number of people noted her appreciation of the talents of others, her belief in and support of her staff, and her willingness to take risks and give the people she works with 'permission' to do the same.

Interestingly, when you ask Lee to describe herself she says 'patient' and 'balanced'. She says that, in her four years at Upper Coomera, she has learned patience and to enjoy the journey she, the staff, students and parents are taking together.

She leans, she says, towards Eastern philosophy, which recognises that life is a slow journey which you should enjoy, celebrating in your own heart, and publicly, the small things that build the big things; and suggests that if she had followed the Western philosophy of wanting everything immediately, she might have advanced her vision, but it is not likely others would own the vision. As it is now, all practices in the school lead towards the vision, and all stakeholders are moving in the same direction.

Lee's patience, and refusal to give up if there is only a sliver of a chance of something being successful, has been rewarded many times at Upper Coomera State College. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the magnificent performing arts facility on campus. When Lee first arrived at Coomera, one of the first things she noticed was the lack of community facilities. There was simply nothing in the vicinity that community members could access for local activities. Lee lobbied the Gold Coast City Council, individual council members, built networks and generally pursued the council to improve school and community infrastructure. After three years of encouragement, patience and plain stubbornness, Lee convinced the council to become Education Queensland's partner by contributing \$800,000 to enhance the capacity and function of this important community facility. The school now has a 450-seat hall on campus that is used by a playgroup, churches, theatre groups and the school. Furthermore, the school manages the facility and uses the rental money received from community groups to cover all the maintenance costs. The facility that now stands in the college grounds is a result of Lee's belief that schools are there for their communities, and is one of many initiatives derived from emphasis on the importance of partnerships in underpinning the college's progress.

Next, Lee turned her attention to the community's need for a library. How, Lee asked, could she encourage literacy skills and develop a love of reading if her students, their families and the broader community did not have easy access to an extensive school or public library? For two and a half years, including one year spent negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding, Lee talked to the council, finally winning support for a joint school-community library facility. The library was established with 10,000 items accessible only to the Upper Coomera community, and open to local residents

on two afternoons per week. In addition, community members and students are able to order a book from anywhere on the Gold Coast and have it delivered to the school.

This strong belief, that schools are much more than institutions to be opened from nine till three, is a thread running through Lee's comments about education. She believes schools must be part of their communities, and must be involved in both empowering and building the community and in giving back. She sees this as especially important in the relentless, uncertain, constantly changing, and frequently transient world young people and their families are facing. Lee sees schools as 'living communities.'

As mentioned previously, the school is in the Gold Coast Innovation Corridor which takes in all the industries, from Movie World in the South to Yatala in the North. The idea of the corridor is to maximise employment opportunities and there has been a strong push from the Queensland government to encourage local councils and businesses to work together and be innovative in identifying real work partnerships and work opportunities for the students.

Upper Coomera State College has been supported financially by the government to buy essential pieces of equipment that have allowed the school to build a partnership with Stratco Queensland. The partnership involves the company providing the school with off-cuts in steel, aluminium and other materials, and the students are able to make items such as letterboxes and toolboxes, and then 'dual badge' and sell them through Stratco outlets.

These benefits to the school have not come quickly or easily. They may have been sparked by passion and enthusiasm, but it is, Lee believes, patience, diplomacy, and consultation that have brought them to fruition.

The second aspect of Lee's philosophy is 'balance'. She believes strongly that she needs to constantly renew her enthusiasm by maintaining a life outside of school. For this reason she finds time for family and other interests by maximising every hour she has. As she says, your children will grow up quickly, so don't let them reach their adulthood and say, 'I wish I'd spent more time with them'.

To ensure this does not happen, she makes sure that family time is a priority. For example, she takes her long service leave in regular, small increments so that each year she is able to take two weeks, on average, of quality time with her family, generally on active holidays, which she, her husband and, most importantly, her two boys love. She also organises her day-to-day schedule to double up activities. She combines time with her husband, with walking and running to keep fit; spends time with her sons at the gym; catches up on the news while driving; takes her 'to read' folder with her everywhere she goes, 'just in case of a traffic jam or a delayed appointment'; and uses a laptop or personal digital assistant to catch up on emails, organise her schedule and complete other small tasks while watching her boys at soccer. She also foregoes television and movies, using some of the time she saves to reflect on her personal growth and what is important.

Lee feels it is not only important to have balance in her own life but also to encourage it in the lives of her staff. For this reason she models balance by involvement in her son's schooling, doing such things as preschool roster and attending sports carnivals; and she encourages other staff members to do the same. Staff members

know that, if there is an important event in the life of their families, they will not only have 'permission' to attend, but will be encouraged.

Key accomplishments

Upper Coomera State College has been exceptionally successful for such a young school. As well as being the only school in Queensland to achieve three district Education Queensland showcase awards, it has also achieved two national awards: for 'school improvement in literacy'; and a 'team approach to learning in the middle phase'. It has also been strongly involved in the Australian Business Week National Award for Primary Schools, has obtained two consecutive Australian Government grants for a cluster project on 'values and philosophy in schools', is a 'pacesetter school for ICT: girls in technology', has received six state awards in film and television in one year, and has been successful in the region in debating and sport.

In October 2006, Lee was selected as one of 100 school leaders from 14 countries to 'attend the first international workshop for outstanding school leaders' from around the world. The workshop, held in Beijing, under the auspices of the National Academy of Education Administration and iNet - the international arm of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust - was by invitation only, with the major criterion for selection 'outstanding performance as an outstanding leader of a school or schools, or for services to education'. The aim of the workshop was to initiate a global dialogue on educational leadership and system transformation and culminated in a communiqué from the 100 principals outlining their thoughts about the future of education.

While both this personal accomplishment and the school's achievements are gratifying, Lee does not name them in her list of major accomplishments. For her, the major accomplishments are such things as empowering others to make a difference, motivating others to achieve through their own passion and energy, and giving staff and students belief in themselves.

Personally, she says the satisfaction she receives from her work is 'huge'. Seeing others excited about what they have accomplished, or receiving an email from a parent confirming how happy their child is, these are the things that make Lee feel good about her work and passionate and proud about her school.

Giving back to the profession

An important part of Lee's life is in giving back to the profession. She believes it is important for teachers to support their own profession through proactive membership of professional associations, mentorship of other teachers, and providing effective professional development. This has led her to playing a leading and active role in education in Australia, through her work with the Australian Council of Education Leaders (ACEL), at both state and national levels.

Lee is also a member of the Queensland Secondary Principals' Association, the Queensland Association of State School Principals and the Queensland Preschool to Year 12 Association.

In giving back to the profession, Lee sees it as essential to support and encourage all teachers, whether undergraduates, interns, graduates or experienced teachers. Her

concept of ‘individual pathways for the future’, thus refers as much to staff as it does to students and underpins the college’s priorities in developing a professional learning community. ‘Teachers supporting teachers’ is encouraged through a range of strategies.

All teachers and support staff are assisted in devising individual development plans and there is a shared approach to meeting the set goals. Most importantly, the Teaching Professional Team approach makes a significant difference to how teachers feel about the school. If you ask a teacher about the best part of being a staff member at Upper Coomera State College, the almost universal answer is ‘my team’. They will then go on to talk about the importance of the support they get and can give. The supportive team approach starts even before the official school year begins, with the team leaders welcoming new members by calling the team together for a planning meeting, followed by a social event.

Key challenges

The key challenge of the principalship for Lee has simply been finding time for everyone, and for all the demands placed upon her. The role is a constant balancing act, which, she concedes, sometimes makes it impossible to fit in every person who needs attention or to acknowledge every achievement. This is why she is constantly reviewing processes and structures to maximise time to be with students, teachers and family. She is philosophical about disappointments, however, choosing to learn from them, rather than take them to heart.

Another challenge she sees is balancing the tension between wanting to move the school journey forward quickly and giving others time to travel on their own journeys. While the big picture is the school’s vision, it is important not to lose sight of the journey and passion of each individual along the way. This is part of the ‘East versus West’ dichotomy, and Lee’s understanding that, while searching for the best solution at all times, there sometimes has to be compromise in the short term for long-term benefit.

Almost four years into her role as principal at Upper Coomera State College, Lee is not ready yet to say her work is done. She is anxious to further evolve the ‘best school’ concept and have all staff members ‘own’ it. While she is always hopeful of finding new, exciting challenges, right now she asks, ‘What can I have that could be more exciting than Upper Coomera?’ She feels unbelievably privileged to hold the position she has and incredibly lucky to be in such an exciting and rewarding profession.

Being a principal in the future: The inside-outside story

Lee is looking forward to the next ten years in education, which she thinks will be remarkable at state, national and international levels. She sees leadership in schools changing and expects that principals will need to be more creative, flexible, innovative, problem-solvers in future.

She believes one central thing will be to work with other parts of the community. Schools will not be able to view themselves as separate entities from their immediate, or wider, communities if they want to be the best they can be for their students.

Schools will need to explore, value and maximise the great opportunities for

working in partnership with local businesses in order to develop pathways for senior students; principals will need to be strong educational leaders, ensuring they are cognisant of the research on how children learn, and able to convey this information to staff and parents; they will need to recognise that school has changed from the time when they were receiving an education and that students now get ‘switched on’ by different pedagogies from those of the past. Their capacity for multi-tasking, for example, is aeons away from the capacity of their parents and teachers.

Not only will principals need to know how teaching and learning must change, they must also help communities come to terms with these changes and with the digital world. The resources, staffing, financial and training implications needed to assist students make the most of their opportunities and ensure Australia’s future prosperity, must be a whole community responsibility. In this regard, Lee agrees with Fullan (2000) in his assertion that both local school development and the quality of the surrounding infrastructure are critical for lasting success. In what he calls ‘the three stories of reform’, Fullan argues that, for ongoing success, schools must take note of:

- the ‘inside story – what we know about how schools change for the better in terms of their internal dynamics;
- the ‘inside-outside’ story – what effective schools do as they contemplate the plethora of outside forces impinging on them; and
- the ‘outside-in’ story – how agencies external to the school organise themselves to be effective in accomplishing large-scale reform at the school level.

With regard to the ‘inside-outside’ story, Fullan says that the:

... walls of the school have become more permeable and transparent. Teachers and principals now operate under a microscope in a way that they have never had to do before. This new environment is complex, turbulent, contradictory, relentless, uncertain, and unpredictable. At the same time, it has increased the demands for better performance and greater accountability. In light of this new reality, teachers and principals must reframe their roles and shift their orientations to the outside. (Fullan, 2000, 581-584)

Things that were once outside the school have now moved in, and while they threaten the independence of schools, in some ways they are also critical for success. It is principals who have a huge role to play in leading schools through these turbulent times. Lee has found her greatest learning occurs in moments when she is most uncomfortable or most challenged. She believes that leaders, and society as a whole, must ask the hard questions and indulge in open self-reflection if they are going to make a difference.

As for Upper Coomera State College, the vision of being ‘the best’ is a challenge Lee is determined to achieve – patiently, collaboratively, and passionately. You can’t help but think she’ll succeed.

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RHONDA BRAIN

The Woman Who Taught a Town to Read

By Ian McKay

Passion, commitment, faith and a deep love of children. It is these words that best characterise Rhonda Brain as an extraordinary Australian educational leader and contributor to her community. From 1989 to 2006, as principal of Parkes Public School, Rhonda has left an indelible mark on the lives of Parkes' children, the community of Parkes, and indeed the wider society, particularly throughout western New South Wales.

During her seventeen years as principal, Rhonda Brain took Parkes Public School from being 'an average school to a school of absolute excellence' (Phil Dixon, President, Parkes Public School Parents and Citizens Association, 2006). Her contribution to Parkes Public School and the wider Parkes community has been extraordinary and epitomises all that is good about the leadership of Australia's schools and the unique role of principals within their communities. In 2007, in recognition of her 'service to education, particularly through developing and promoting the community-based *Birth to Kindergarten* – Spread the Word literacy program', Rhonda received the Medal of the Order of Australia.



Parkes, a modern town of around 10,500 people, had its genesis in the gold rushes of the 19th century. Today, Parkes is a thriving commercial centre that services a rich agricultural district, though it is arguably best known for the CSIRO radio telescope set in a broad, shallow valley some 20km north of the town itself. The 2000 movie, *The Dish*, which showcased the role the telescope had played in the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing, created worldwide recognition for Parkes, which promotes itself as the community, 'where astronomy and innovation co-exist with rural productivity'.

*Rhonda Brain AM, Parkes Public School,
Parkes, New South Wales.*

Rhonda Brain's innovative leadership has also placed Parkes on the educational map in New South Wales. Mike Greenwood, Parkes Shire Economic Development Manager, describes the town as highly receptive to the concept of community and to change: an attitudinal development profoundly influenced by Rhonda Brain over almost two decades. He explains that Parkes today promotes itself as the literary capital of Australia, as a direct result of Rhonda's talent, energy and creativity.

Birth to Kindergarten program

Rhonda Brain's achievements are multi dimensional and provide a legacy that will benefit the Parkes community for generations to come. As a principal, Rhonda will be best remembered as the driving force behind the remarkable *Birth to Kindergarten – Spread the Word* project. The project, with the slogan, 'read to, talk to, sing to, model reading to, say nursery rhymes to and play with your child right from birth', involves all public and private schools as well as kindergartens in Parkes and has spread to many other centres in mid western New South Wales and further afield. In essence, the project has been an immense awareness-raising campaign, emphasising the critical importance of commencing reading from birth. The project aimed at, and has succeeded in, focussing the entire community on interactive language and 'owning' the project.

The *Birth to Kindergarten* philosophy continues to be underpinned by the belief that babies are capable of making positive associations with books and stories. By being read to at the earliest opportunity babies learn that books can be comforting, interesting and fun, and it can help them acquire the foundations of literacy success.

Birth to Kindergarten succeeded in recapturing the family pastime of reading together: allowing parents and their youngsters to bond more effectively by addressing our three basic emotional needs - belonging, worthiness and competency. The project has achieved its goals to an amazing extent, with significant anecdotal evidence supporting the changed reading attitudes within the community. There are instances of families coming to Parkes Public School to proudly share photos of their preschool aged child reading to a new baby balanced on its lap.

The project has become so embedded into the fabric of the Parkes community that it is spoken of at all levels; even at a recent baby shower one of the quiz questions was, 'What is the *Birth to Kindergarten* slogan?' Parkes town leaders and businesses have wholeheartedly embraced and supported the project, as evidenced by an exceptionally high level of involvement in the annual community reading day. The project has captured the imagination and enthusiasm of the whole community and is strongly supported by all local schools, Parkes Shire Council, local businesses and community organisations. The Mayor of Parkes, Cr Robert Wilson OAM, acknowledges how Parkes has been provided with a unique opportunity to embrace and showcase an effective project, which has served to develop and strengthen language skills and provide a headstart for formal learning within the local community.

When Rhonda Brain arrived at Parkes Public School as principal, the school was generally looked upon by many within the community as a place to which you would not want to go. Literacy levels were low with a growing number of language delayed children, and Rhonda decided that it was to be her mission to lift the profile

of the school and share with teachers and parents her absolute passion regarding the importance of children learning to read.

In 1993, Rhonda established a three-year action research project to respond to literacy and language concerns. During this period, with full staff support, resources were focussed on kindergarten to year two. The school adopted the aspirational goal that all children should be reading at or above their chronological age by the end of year two. After the three year action research project, 87 per cent of children had achieved that goal. The question that Rhonda and her leadership team asked was, 'Why are some children still reading below their chronological age, despite the intensive direction of resources during the three year period?' It was concluded that it was what happened before a child came to school that made a vital difference. Local midwife and former parent at Parkes Public School, Barbara Stokes, believes that, as a midwife, she can identify which children will struggle with reading. She felt sure that, if 'you could 'hot house' these children they could be saved'. The scene was now set for the creation of the *Birth to Kindergarten* project.

The *Birth to Kindergarten* project was underpinned by the provision of information to prospective and new parents at every step in their journey towards parenthood. When a mother registers at the hospital's maternity ward she is provided with the booklet, *So you're having a baby*, thus commencing the project's encouragement for parents to 'read to, talk to, sing to, model reading to, say nursery rhymes to and play with your child right from birth.' At birth, every newborn child receives the gift of a book, whilst mothers are given a booklet, *Give your baby the best possible start in life*. When the parents take their child for their first immunisation, they are given a third booklet, *Immunise your child against reading problems*. Year 9 students, the next generation of parents, are given the final booklet in the series, *Injection for Success*, to raise the awareness of young people who may become parents in the next 5-10 years.

The attitudinal changes within the community regarding literacy are particularly evident at the Parkes Community Reading Day. A high profile event staged annually, it demonstrates that the parents, other adults and the wider community are thinking and talking about reading to children, and provides clear and unambiguous evidence of Rhonda's literacy improvement legacy. Rhonda's energy and vigour ensure that the concept of a Community Reading Day does not become tired and stale. Annual themes have included Celebrities and Book Characters, Grandparents, People in Uniform, Millennium Reading Bug and Mem Fox Characters. 'Paint the Town Read' encouraged everyone in Parkes to wear red to 'show you are well read'. Another year, the community created a one kilometre long reading line of 2,090 people that resulted in the closure of the main street of Parkes!

Rhonda saw the need for children in years 3-6 to be more sophisticated in their use of language. More resources were directed to learning support, a year 3-4 literacy class was established, and teachers supported with on-the-job training. For a year, the whole school undertook phonic drills for fifteen minutes each morning. To assist, Rhonda provided weekly phonic/word attack lessons for staff before school, where she developed and provided all resources, such as flashcards, and instructed the teachers as if they were students. The teachers then taught the same lesson to their classes, utilising the modelling provided by their principal.

Rhonda the 'accidental leader'

Rhonda's passion for literacy has reached almost legendary status within the community of Parkes. There are numerous anecdotes of Rhonda stopping parents in town to apprise them, 'If it's the only thing that you do for your baby today, read to him/her.'

Like many great leaders, Rhonda was almost an 'accidental leader'. She was, for many years, resistant to embarking down the road to principalship. Her parents lived in Coonabarabran, just a few hours north northeast of Parkes, where her father was a long time Ford motor vehicle dealer. Rhonda continues to drive a Ford. She has never owned a vehicle manufactured by another car maker; indicative perhaps of her characteristic passion and loyalty.

Rhonda was the youngest of seven children; with a gap of ten years between the elder five and the sixth, then a further three years to Rhonda. In her youth, teaching and nursing were the accepted career paths for bright young ladies like Rhonda. She chose teaching and, on completion of her secondary schooling in Coonabarabran, continued on to Armidale Teachers' College.

Upon graduating, Rhonda commenced teaching in rural New South Wales at Corowa, on the Murray River, before spending four years at Gwabegar in the Pilliga Scrub, an hour's drive northwest of her family in Coonabarabran. Rhonda was then transferred home to Coonabarabran where, unbeknown to her at the time, she commenced her journey towards principalship; and towards becoming an educational leader capable of influencing the attitudes of an entire community. Following the years of her homecoming, her passion for literacy developed further: to provide a philosophical platform for the leadership she would later provide in Parkes Public School and the *Birth to Kindergarten* project.

During this phase in her life, Rhonda's Christian faith deepened and progressively became her life compass. At the end of her ten years in Coonabarabran, she was granted six months leave to attend the Discipleship Training School in Goulburn. For Rhonda, this course reinforced the notion that, to have authority as a leader, one must be under authority. She believes her Christian faith has continued to make a difference in all that she undertakes.

After completing her time at Discipleship Training School, Rhonda returned to teaching. A brief twelve-month posting at Kempsey was followed by an appointment as assistant principal at Peak Hill, 50 kilometres north of Parkes. As many principals will attest, entry into the principalship is not always of one's own choosing but rather through varying degrees of subtle pressure by senior education officers. Such was Rhonda's experience. Educational leadership had not been a career goal, and she was not initially happy about moving in that direction. However, Rhonda's strong faith led her to believe that her appointment to the principalship at Parkes Public School was her mission field and that she had been called to that school due to her unique gift of being able to manage people effectively.

For Rhonda, unshakable faith and strong commitment to family and community have moulded her life compass and endowed her with a degree of compassion that manifests itself in her uncanny ability to help those in trouble. Not surprisingly, Rhonda laments the inadequate number of people who, from her perspective, are working for the good of the country and their community.

Rhonda the inspirational leader

Rhonda has high ethical standards and has had a positive moral influence on those with whom she has been associated. She has, for many years, been a motivating force on the Peak Hill Reforming Alliance Church Council. During this time, she has been the driving force in the church's community outreach work and, since 2001, a catalyst for work in East Timor. Rhonda has personally resourced four visits to East Timor. Through the support of churches, schools and direct giving of church members, \$30,000 was raised for the most recent trip to bring electric light to a village. Previous visits facilitated completion of several projects. Weberek Village had run out of water in the dry season after the well and pump had been destroyed by departing Indonesians. A large tank and solar pump were installed to allow the Weberek villagers access to water. Further support has been given to Kids Ark, a preschool in Hera Village, located 30 minutes from Dilli. The children and families of Parkes Public School have given directly to support the rent of the building.

Principal of Parkes East Public School, Bill Cox, acknowledges that Rhonda's leadership in the early years of her principalship was instrumental in establishing a collegiate of local principals. This group involves principals of all public and private schools, together with local kindergartens. Rhonda became the face of Parkes principals with community organisations, businesses and the wider community. Her commitment, leadership and involvement transcended her own school and was reflected in her willingness to 'walk the talk' within the community. Her leadership was characterised by her tenacity and her ability to identify needs and develop projects that addressed the identified needs. Referred to by many of her colleagues as the 'queen of submission writing', Rhonda is extremely adept at sourcing avenues to resource the needs of her school and community.

As a principal, Rhonda demanded high standards of her staff and colleagues, although her expectations were tempered by her ongoing capacity to continually affirm their contributions. She habitually thanked people, no matter how minor the contribution. Rhonda was consistent in acknowledging involvement through affirmations such as a handwritten note and a chocolate or similar token.

A long-time assistant principal of Parkes Public School, Sherree Roser, recounted the powerful affirming leadership demonstrated by Rhonda with her executive staff. Believing that the executive staff operated as 'partners in action', Rhonda encouraged what might be called 'roving leadership', allowing extreme latitude for them to develop their ideas. Sherree noted Rhonda's ability to 'grow leaders' and her extraordinary capacity to empower people, through, for example, her ability to mentor senior staff and to then encourage them to mentor classrooms teachers. As Sherree recounts, one of Rhonda's greatest legacies will be that she has trained and mentored leaders who are now, themselves, leading other schools, thereby extending her influence on the development of children all over New South Wales.

During Rhonda's early years as principal, Judy Huda was a member of her executive staff. Now principal of a local Christian School, Judy remembers the impact of Rhonda's leadership style during an early discussion. Judy had a few ideas on integration which Rhonda carefully considered. She then encouraged Judy to chair a conversation with the executive staff. Judy's ideas were then approved and backed by Rhonda. Judy

believes that one of Rhonda's strengths as a leader is this capacity to allow her staff to explore innovative practices. Judy's own promotion to the principalship and her early success as a leader have been influenced and inspired by Rhonda, through, for example, helping to clarify her leadership philosophy and develop an understanding of the role of principal.

Rhonda's leadership has also been focused on the development of teachers. She understood that if teachers were unmotivated, their strengths rather than their weaknesses, needed to be identified. By focusing on their strengths and providing ample support, she allowed under-performing teachers to experience success and recapture their motivation. Whilst strongly believing in the need to regularly affirm staff, she was, nonetheless, willing to make the tough decisions required of her as a leader. Rhonda, however, managed such processes with compassion and the unique gift of ensuring staff members maintained their self esteem and sense of worth.

Rhonda's legacy

Rhonda reached out to her school community and developed strong relationships with the local media that has led, over time, to a dramatic change in community perceptions towards the school. As managing editor of the local newspaper, *Champion Post*, since 1984, Roel Ten Catel has observed the full 17 years of Rhonda's principalship and reflects upon the early impact that she had in the community, manifested by her limitless exuberance and enthusiasm. Her capacity to enthuse people has had a positive early influence on the image of her school within the community and this perception has continued to grow throughout her principalship - 'Everyone knows Rhonda and she has become a very popular lady in town.' One of the strengths that Rhonda has displayed is that she is consistently prepared for the media; she thinks in a media promotional way and always has a well organised photo opportunity. For Roel, her leadership of *Birth to Kindergarten* has given Parkes an enviable profile, and the community wants to be part of it. 'It is good for us as a newspaper, as the involvement of the whole community in the project encourages people to read the newspaper,' he reasons.

Regardless of Rhonda's many successes at Parkes Public School, it is unquestionably the *Birth to Kindergarten* project that will be Rhonda's most enduring and far-reaching accomplishment. The project has, in every conceivable way, been an unqualified success; the change in community attitudes is a remarkable testament to Rhonda's capacity to see the big picture, her visionary perspective and her leadership. This program and its impact in the community will be an important part of her legacy.

Prior to the implementation of the *Birth to Kindergarten* project, the school could not achieve greater than 70 per cent of prospective kindergarten parents presenting for interview. In recent years, with *Birth to Kindergarten* now firmly established within the community, and widespread awareness of the significance of literacy, there is almost full attendance at enrolment interviews each year.

Rhonda's forethought, planning, and great attention to detail have characterised her achievements. She has consistently assembled and supported teams to introduce new initiatives to ensure effective implementation. This preplanning, together with the commitment she inspires in those around her, is reflected in a largely unchanged *Birth to Kindergarten* committee over the years. Those involved remain as committed,

hardworking and diligent as they were in the early years of the project.

Rhonda's fervour has given her the zeal to grasp any opportunity to further the ideals of the project. For example, some years ago, when attending the ANZAC service at Gallipoli, Rhonda approached the then Governor General, Sir William Deane, briefed him on the project and invited him to visit Parkes for a Community Reading Day. That he subsequently did so is further testament to Rhonda's influence. Rhonda makes extensive use of well-known identities to promote the *Birth to Kindergarten* project. The celebrities who have provided photos of themselves engaged in reading include renowned author, Bryce Courtney; Governor General, Sir William Deane; NSW Governor, Maree Bashir; acclaimed children's author, Mem Fox; Clean up Australia identity, Ian Kiernan; Federal Minister for Education, Brendon Nelson; and Rugby League great, Mal Meninga. It is particularly significant that, having been so impressed by *Birth to Kindergarten*, Her Excellency, Maree Bashir, bestowed vice-regal patronage upon the project.

A further example of Rhonda's promotional gusto occurred in 2001. Rhonda wrote to Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, inviting her to attend the Centenary of Federation Community Reading Day. As might be expected, the Queen Mother graciously declined through a letter from her Private Secretary. However, the newspaper headlines 'Sorry, but the Queen Mother cannot come', provided exceptional publicity for the forthcoming event. Canvassing the support of notable identities, continues to be a key promotional activity in raising awareness, with invitations having been issued in different years to the Australian Prime Minister, Hilary Clinton and George Bush.

Further examples of Rhonda's foresight and relentless determination to promote literacy and the *Birth to Kindergarten* project, include literacy-based placemats in McDonalds and other food outlets on annual Community Reading Days. Furthermore, reading was featured on the 2001 telephone directory for the Parkes Region.

During 2005, with the support of the Department of Education and the Families First Initiative, Rhonda took the project to the western region of New South Wales. She conceived the concept of a book relay, similar to the Olympic torch relay, whereby a book would be passed from community to community delivering the literacy message under the banner of, 'Paint the West Read'. A mammoth logistic effort! But what a stunning community success! The relay began with a 'Reading Bug', book in hand embarking a west-bound train at Parkes for a nine day, 5000 kilometre odyssey. Fifty-five communities, from Lithgow to Broken Hill and Tibooburra to Wentworth were involved in the enormously successful event, concluding with the Bug, book and several celebrities, including Mem Fox amongst them, being hoisted skyward on the world famous 'Dish'.

Birth to Kindergarten has been a perfect platform to involve the wider community, to grow communities and reignite community spirit. Over the years, the schools in Parkes have become increasingly involved with other agencies, leading to the establishment of the *Birth to Kindergarten* Early Intervention Working Party in 2004 as an extension of the ongoing *Birth to Kindergarten* project. The working party comprises government agencies, schools, community agencies and Department of Education representatives, with a vision to establish a 'super centre for everything parents need for their pre-kindergarten child'.

Another of Rhonda's achievements was the establishment of a powerful behaviour management program that remains in use, with modification, more than a decade later. She remains passionate that children should know that for every action there is a consequence. Her concept of tough love can be exemplified by the story of a small boy called Timothy (not his real name) who was sent to the office for a behaviour outburst. Rhonda, as principal, told the child to go into an adjoining office and sit on the floor until he calmed down. At the appropriate time Rhonda went in and spoke to the child. Standing up above the child she told him, 'Timothy, I love you'. Timothy's response was a scowl. When Rhonda bent down a little and repeated, 'Timothy, I love you' a hint of a smile from the child was evident. Crouching closer to the child, still sitting on the floor, Rhonda again stated, 'Timothy, I really love you, (a broad smile from Timothy) but I don't like your behaviour.' The conversation about Timothy's behaviour then continued in an environment where, possibly, it was the only time unconditional love had been offered to Timothy.

Repeatedly, colleagues and community members will speak of Rhonda's outstanding capacity to involve others in the community. Judy Huda relates the immense difference that Rhonda has made to the community, highlighting the importance of literacy and the development of interagency co-operation. *The Birth to Kindergarten – Spread the Word* project is now an ongoing community campaign highlighting the importance of talking and reading to children from birth.

Numerous anecdotes demonstrate the project's impact on attitudes and awareness within the community. One story refers to a young male in a local hotel. A television in the bar was airing a current affair segment relating to a 'breakthrough' in the field of literacy. The man stated indignantly for all to hear, 'That's rubbish! What you have to do is read to your child from when they are born. My daughter is now three months old and I read to her every day.' Similarly, a lady in a butcher's shop became irate with an item on television about a well-known author, who had written a story about the Reading Bug. 'He'll probably make a million dollars over something we've been doing for years,' the lady said. The level of community ownership and engagement is clearly evident.

The success of the project and other work undertaken by Rhonda Brain at Parkes Public School has been acknowledged with a succession of awards. In 1994, she received the Minister's Award for Excellence in Teaching. In 2001, a Premier's Award for Community Service followed, and in 2002 she received the NSW Primary Principals' Association Award for 'outstanding leadership in the areas of teaching and learning in NSW public schools.' She has also received a Recognition Award for exceptional service to children and the profession from the Orange District of NSW Department of Education and Training. In 2004, Rhonda was Runner-up in the Scholastic Australian Primary Principals' Leadership Award, while in 2005 she was awarded a prestigious Paul Harris Fellowship from Rotary International, recognising her literacy and humanitarian work in East Timor. Her proudest recognition however was in 2000, when she was the first runner of the day in Parkes, as part of the Sydney Olympic Torch Relay. Newspaper headlines extolling that 'Brain takes the Flame' and a banner held up by children from Parkes Public School, 'Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No! It's Super Brain!' holds a special place in Rhonda's memories.

The woman who taught a town to read

When Rhonda reflects on her role as educator and as principal, she is unequivocal that the core business of principals must always be children. Her mantra is relevant for all educational leaders: 'If children leave us not having been given every opportunity, we have failed.' Through her actions, Rhonda has continually shown her total devotion to the growth and nurture of the children in her school and in the wider community. Her leadership is underpinned by the belief that belonging, worthiness and competency are the rights of all children, rights that can be achieved through literacy. A principal, according to Rhonda, must be an outstanding teacher to assist, guide, model and support teachers in teaching children literacy and numeracy.

Rhonda is very aware that principalship is all about leading people, and it is her unique gift to relate to people and bring them with her, as she introduces new initiatives, that have allowed her principalship to be such a success, and reading to become embedded in the consciousness of her community. The community is now aware that it has a shared responsibility with schools for literacy development. 'Rhonda's leadership and vision in promoting the vital importance of early learning experiences has engaged the entire Parkes community, resulting in widespread community participation in activities and ongoing support of the program' (Carole McDiarmid, Regional Director, DET, NSW).

As a leader she is renowned for never letting a chance go by. This trait can be best exemplified through an anecdote from the 2005 'Paint the West Read' reading relay. It is the Cobar main street at 7.00am. A man came out of a hotel and asked what was going on. Rhonda seized the opportunity and entered the bar, to not only explain the project but also solicit donations from the shift workers enjoying a drink following the completion of their shift.

Mem Fox expresses her feeling of being privileged to have worked with Rhonda:

I am in awe of people like Rhonda who can inspire a whole town to get behind an excellent idea... Rhonda's tireless, endless, passionate work has brought the town together in many hilarious annual Reading Days. I attended one of them as a guest and was truly inspired by the spirit that was in evidence.

The Mayor of Parkes, Cr Robert Wilson OAM, describes Rhonda's contribution to the Parkes community:

Rhonda has provided to the wider community a profound legacy: her innovation; her leadership, organising and initiating acumen, and capacity to motivate and maintain community standards. While education has been her primary strength, her selfless community involvement and commitment have underpinned a most significant contribution to enhancing the quality of life enjoyed by literally thousands of people.

Fittingly, the last word should be left to Rhonda Brain, an exceptional principal whose passion and commitment, like so many of Australia's best educational leaders, has made a real difference for her school and community, 'If it's not good for the kids' why are we doing it?' Rhonda has continued to focus on what is good for children and in the process has become renowned as 'the woman who taught a town to read'.

SHANE GORMAN

The Accidental Principal

By Robert Fitzgerald

Shane Gorman has a passion for education, the environment, adventure, challenge and the Arts. It is this unusual combination that set him on the path to become the principal of Birrigai Outdoor School in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). Birrigai is a residential outdoor education centre that provides educational programs first and foremost for students from pre-school to Year 12. It also offers professional development for ACT Department of Education and Training staff, and team building programs for corporate groups. Set in bushland adjacent to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, Birrigai is a very special educational setting. The outstanding feature of Birrigai, something that Shane has worked hard with his team to create, is that it is a welcoming place of great aesthetic form where young people come together to learn how to take responsibility for creating a more sustainable future. Its mission is to empower students and the community to move towards this goal by:

- developing individual capacity through high-quality environmental, outdoor pursuits and cultural programs; and
- modelling positive action for the environment through ecologically sustainable design and practices.



Throughout Shane's story you will note that he lives by reflections of his core values: valuing the worth and dignity of the individual; building sustainable communities; and promoting flexible lifelong learning. These values permeate every aspect of his work and have directed and guided his career choices.

Shane is by nature a warm and friendly man who radiates confidence and style. With a background in secondary schools, mostly

Shane Gorman, Birrigai Outdoor School, Australian Capital Territory.

teaching art and physical education, he has been a founding staff member of two high schools in the ACT. His first executive position was at what he describes as a traditional high school. The experience of this school was challenging and it confirmed for Shane that curriculum should be flexible enough to respond to all students' needs. After a relatively short time there, he transferred to a school that was more closely aligned with his educational philosophy.

Listening to Shane talk about his journey, you come to understand that he is passionate about making a difference and contributing to the broader public good. Therefore, the Birrigai vision has a strong community dimension. In recent years Shane has worked across the ACT system, particularly through the Primary Principals' Association to represent, support and mentor others. He also talks about working with 'the rough diamonds' of our schools, the children. Shane believes school systems need to create varied opportunities that reach out to all these children.

Shane's philosophy and values

The values of respect and understanding are core to his work. However, he is quick to point out that these are not to be confused with the concept of tolerance. Teaching tolerance never really made much sense to him, because, tolerating or 'putting up with' people does not require understanding, respect nor a willingness to work with others, and it is these key skills that our society, especially our young people, needs. This is not just about students. To be effective, teachers need to strive for quality and be positive role models. Shane has always set high standards for himself and others. While of course these are laudable, the reality is this does not always make the job easy. Sometimes personal standards do not match with others' views and ways of being. Shane has never shied away from reconciling differences, especially when he has been in positions of leadership. This does not always make you popular but it's about adhering to your values. However, as he explains, you can't please all of the people all of the time.

Shane believes that it is important to create opportunities for sharing and to give people opportunities to shine. He has always been grateful for the opportunities he has been given to do a job that he often finds exhilarating. He explains that, while we may not always get it right the first time, we have to keep trying to do the right thing.

Shane's journey has been influenced by many significant relationships. He talks passionately of students he has taught over the years and how they have pushed him to make a difference. He also is quick to acknowledge the enormous amount he has learnt, and is continuing to learn, from others: the dedicated classroom teachers who have shared their wisdom with him; the colleagues who have encouraged him to take on new challenges, and the friends who have supported him during difficult times. Shane is a man who shares his passion and caring in ways that build strong relationships. In fact, you see in Shane a story of others; the people who have influenced, guided, challenged, and mattered to him. His story is also one about opportunities and coincidences that arise from the complexities of everyday life.

Early in his career Shane realised that you can't perform the job of being an educator on your own. No matter how competent you might think you are as a teacher, or how extensive your expertise in your subject matter, at the end of the day teaching

and learning are a process of joint construction between people. Central to this process is the need for good communication and teamwork. At times, these teams can be enriched by calling on outsiders, but in most cases Shane has found that the local school community - the teachers, parents and students - have the skills and capabilities to address the problems at hand. As a naturally optimistic person, Shane is very aware of how pessimistic people can erode and undermine schools. He readily acknowledges the complexities of working in schools today and the huge pressures faced by teachers, but he works to ensure that negativity does not become *de rigueur*. It is not hard to see how the combination of Shane's strong communication skills and sense of humour could promote a more positive approach. For Shane, people skills are important but understanding the big picture is paramount to guaranteeing results that meet the needs of the community.

A modest but passionate leader

Even to the casual observer, Shane appears as a confident person but he says he doesn't always have that confidence in himself. It took others to recognise his leadership skills and encourage him. It was a classroom teacher who originally pushed Shane to seek out leadership positions. She encouraged him to seize the opportunity to become a leader so that he could make a difference on a much broader level. Her argument was as follows: 'You are a great teacher who already makes a significant difference in the lives of your students. In a leadership position you can widen that impact and reach the wider educational community, while still holding true to your focus on students.' The fact that others so clearly see his potential has spurred him on to aspire to leadership roles and this has inspired greater self-confidence. Even with this greater confidence, Shane still says he has moments when he feels the job is beyond him.

When Shane became principal of Birrigai, he immediately made things happen; over the next two years, he focussed on creating an action plan based on his vision. Many of us have been involved in the development of strategic plans that remain exactly that – plans, empty and unfulfilled. Shane wanted something different and saw the vision as a verb – an action word – a process of imagining and bringing into being. It is clear that in realising this vision, Shane possessed a talent for seeing things differently. Perhaps it was his background in the Arts that helped him unify a more creative vision with the more logical action plan. Michael Fullan talks about similar ideas in his notion of personal vision building. (Fullan, 1993) He argues that we need to keep asking ourselves about the difference that we are trying to make, and give our colleagues opportunities to link the action and thought of new visions and ideas. What Shane did know at this point in his career was that his capacity to create and unify was about to be put to the ultimate test.

On January 18, 2003, fires burning in the nearby Namadgi National Park raced towards Canberra on a 10 kilometre wide front. As the flames and ashes rained down, the lives of many in the ACT region were changed forever. The speed, ferocity, and subsequent devastation of the firestorm, and the tragedy of the lives lost, are deeply etched in people's memories. The statistics were stark. Four people lost their lives with another 260 injured. 530 homes were totally destroyed with numerous others damaged. Over 50,000 ACT residents were directly affected by the fires. The Birrigai

School lost almost three-quarters of its buildings, suffering damage estimated at over two million dollars. The surrounding bush was destroyed and the wildlife decimated. On that day, Shane fought alongside his local rural community to protect his own and others' homes. He remembers holding no hope for his school as he drove through the blackened landscape to see what remained the following day.

Shane now sees the bushfire as another reminder of the threat (ultimately realised) that Birrigai had always been under – whether it be from nature or from other pressures pre-dating the fires. It is because of these threats that Shane became convinced that a clear, strong vision underpinned by core values was critical to nurturing Birrigai. Following the fire, Shane and his staff were presented with a challenge – a challenge to rebuild and remake the school in a way that respected the past, but embraced the future. As he worked with others on this task, he came to see this as a guiding metaphor for the challenges that we all face in our everyday lives. Of course Shane was not alone, the Australian community rallied around its own following the fires. Communities embraced communities; families cared for families, and friends supported friends. Shane was fortunate to experience all of these. He also drew strength, inspiration and hope for Birrigai as he witnessed the return of native wildlife and the regeneration of the surrounding bushland.

Being a principal, for Shane, has always been about projecting what you are on about and Shane knew that he had the necessary raw materials to build these capabilities. He soon realised that the challenge of being a principal was to find ways of looking creatively and holistically at problems. Trying to see obstacles and barriers as opportunities, and looking for aesthetic solutions, were crucial. Remarkably, and in a testament to the hard work of all involved, the New Birrigai school accepted its first students in Term 4, 2003 – fewer than 10 months after the fire. Today it is known as an exemplary educational centre that empowers people to create a more sustainable future. It is a multi campus, community facility, running programs on weekends and during school holidays. Its leading-edge programs are a result of strong partnerships with diverse organisations including:

- The Lanyon Cluster of Schools
- Environment ACT through the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve
- The Australian National Botanic Gardens
- Greening Australia
- Outward Bound Australia

Being a great leader

When Shane summarises the characteristics of great leaders he has known or read about, he is actually (of course not intentionally) providing us with a description of himself as a leader.

He believes that great leaders are, first and foremost, learners – they learn all the time from others. You need as a principal, he says, to learn from children, teachers and others in your school community. By working closely together, everyone benefits, learns and grows as a person, as a professional and as a leader.

Great leaders have very positive attitudes. They look for opportunities even when things go wrong. They help build school cultures that promote and nurture positive

ways of thinking and doing. Positive attitudes and actions are contagious and self-perpetuating.

Great leaders always take responsibility for their words and actions and they encourage others to do the same. Blaming is not part of their repertoire. They do not stand idly by when they observe that conditions and practices are deficient and are not supportive of students' learning. They have the courage of their convictions and they take responsibility and act from their values.

Shane believes that great leaders have to be resilient, able to bounce back from adversity. They don't accept failure or defeat but battle on, even against the odds, to do what they believe to be the right things. The foundation of resilience, he believes, can be sourced in strong personal and professional relationships.

Self-reflection and accepting constructive critique are also characteristics of great leaders. Shane believes that it is impossible to learn and grow as a leader, if one doesn't take time to reflect on practice and also actively seek out feedback from colleagues.

Great leaders seem to be able to find the eye of the storm in work and life. A colleague once said that the greatest lesson she learnt from Shane was the importance of being calm, no matter what happens. It was his capacity to quietly assess where things were up to, and work out where to go next, that seemed to give others confidence and helped spread a sense of calm around.

Great leaders are respectful of others, as persons and as professionals. Shane explains that developing respect is about helping others understand who he is and how he operates. Of course being approachable is important, but more important is the respect they have of Shane as a person and he of them.

Shane, as a great leader himself, exhibits all of the above characteristics and many more. By any definition or list of characteristics, he would have to be classified as a great leader.

It is passion and heart that has led Shane to become a principal and this will continue to guide his future. Shane seems to have an intuitive and even artistic capacity to nurture creative action and focus it for positive educational outcomes.

There is no question that Birrigai is now an imaginative and vibrant place. It has new facilities and is forming new and interesting connections with people and organisations. In this connected age, where information and communication technologies afford virtual experiences, Shane still strongly believes in the importance of maintaining a physical presence in his school. You can't be a principal from the benches and you can't make real progress without a team. Shane's unique combination of experience, expertise and passion, along with his love and knowledge of the bush, provides a balance of core values and skills that allow him to 'go with the flow'.

Shane is a special person, a special principal and an extraordinarily passionate leader. He inspires all those he touches and his legacy will be immense. His love of, and passion for, the environment and animals is only surpassed by his love of, and passion for, the children in his care. His mission is his passion, and this mission is to spread his passion around to everyone who will listen, or who participates in his outdoor activities and programs. Shane is indeed a great leader.

SHEREE VERTIGAN

A Leader with 'Fierce Resolve'

By Roslyn Arnold

When you think of Tasmania you probably think of the wilderness, the pristine beaches, the empty rugged landscapes and the farm cottages like the illustrations in a fifties children's picture book. You wouldn't necessarily think to visit Tasmania for its schools and innovative education system, nor for its school leadership, but you might profitably do so. As do many visitors who go to Reece High School (named after a former Premier of Tasmania) in Devonport on the northern coast of the state. There you would meet the Principal, Ms Sheree Vertigan, and hear her compelling story of a new school, which has literally risen from the ashes of its burned down predecessor to gain a national and international reputation for its dynamic learning culture. Noteworthy too are its links with the local community and its implementation of the Tasmanian Department of Education's innovative school curriculum reform, known as the Essential Learnings Framework.

Devonport is a town of about 25,000 people, skirting along the coastline, with an active port, from which a passenger and car ferry travels across Bass Strait to Melbourne. It is a pleasant, well-cared for port town. Reece High School sits in



a suburban street with its modern angular architecture attesting to the current recognition of the role architecture can play in the dynamics of a school. While Devonport does not strike you as a town in a hurry to change, it has caught the learning bug and its local council supports their reading program. Sheree Vertigan came to Reece High School in 2002, during the re-building of the school which was destroyed by a deliberately lit fire in December, 2000. While the school was being rebuilt, the students from Reece, and those from Devonport High School, had to be co-located at Devonport High and share facilities.

*Sheree Vertigan, Reece High School,
Devonport, Tasmania.*

Needless to say, the arrangement was forced and difficult, and for a time there was uncertainty about the wisdom of rebuilding Reece. A community consultation process confirmed the community's wish for the school to be rebuilt and, in the process, community commitment to support its development was formed.

The state Labour government spent \$10 million to rebuild Reece High School and a Launceston-based architectural firm oversaw the project. In 2003 the new Reece High School won an international design award for innovative learning environments. Sheree Vertigan was actively involved in the process of consultation, even in the first year when she was not yet principal. While the building took place, she was able to question the purpose of construction decisions in terms of the extent to which they enabled learning. Although the process must have been tiring at times (even for a principal whose father was a builder), it served the school well. Flexibility in the use of multi-functional spaces would meet the emerging needs of students in an Essential Learnings Framework which respects individual differences and the need for experiential learning to develop deep understanding. On the 13th of February, 2003, 600 students returned to the rebuilt school and it opened its doors for the new school year.

Sheree Vertigan, the Principal of Reece High School, is in a hurry. Not in a frenetic way, because she is on a mission of great importance; namely, to provide the best possible learning environment for the students under her care. She is not waiting for opportunities, she is creating them, and whatever has already been achieved is but a platform for the next development. She is well aware that students move through a high school quickly and believes that each cohort deserves to experience the best.

The importance of vision and signature at Reece High School

The Essential Learnings Framework is the curriculum framework for learners from Kindergarten to Year 10 in Tasmanian Government schools. It is also used in many non-government schools. The framework is built around five key themes to inform the planning, assessing and reporting of pedagogy. The themes are Communicating, Learning for Understanding, Thinking, World Futures and Personal Futures. The Framework (www.ltag.education.tas.gov.au/effectteach) states:

Effective teaching is the basis of successful learning. Effective learning identifies and builds on prior knowledge, makes real-life connections, develops deep understanding and monitors and reflects on learning.

In implementing the Essential Learnings Framework at Reece High School, Sheree insisted on a whole-school commitment to develop a changed curriculum, based on a deep understanding of teaching and learning. The school's curriculum vision is expressed in the following way:

Reece High will foster a love of learning in all students through an integrated project-based curriculum. It will recognise and aim to fulfil the learning needs of all members of the community.

The school will take advantage of the learning assets of the community and develop in students the skills they need to benefit society. Students will have a sense

of ownership and safety and feel like they belong. Reece will be a learning community that allows teachers and students the freedom to express themselves with creativity and enterprise and to respond positively to challenges.

The Reece High School signature is an expression of the essence of this vision:

Realising individual potential through creativity, enterprise, communication and teamwork.

The vision and signature underpin every aspect of school life at Reece High. They are the basis for the school plan. They provide directions for the future, and give permission to say 'no' to the next best new idea if it is inconsistent with the tenets of the current vision and signature. This permission to say 'no' to ideas incongruent with the agreed vision is important. Schools can be under pressure to make piecemeal changes, which, though seemingly minor in nature, can be damaging to the integrity of the whole. By the same token, the curriculum has to deliver on its promises to improve student learning, and these promises have to be tangible. When a school has a deep commitment to a particular vision, it is usually either inherited through tradition, or hard won, as at Reece, through consultation, community-building, evidence-based communicative strategies, and the integrity of the principal and staff. Creating through relationships and experiences, respect for learning, and pleasure and a sense of achievement in pursuit of learning, builds important human and social capital, as principals like Sheree Vertigan well know.

Principal of Reece High School

Sheree graduated from the University of Tasmania in 1978, and undertook a Masters of Education Studies in the late 1990s, and is currently enrolled in doctoral studies. She has been a teacher at Burnie High School in the north of Tasmania; and English, Speech and Drama and Special Education AST at Scottsdale High School, also in northern Tasmania; and Acting Assistant Principal at Reece High School. Prior to becoming principal at Reece High School, she was Assistant to the District Superintendent in Barrington district. Sheree was appointed to the position of Principal through a standard selection process during which, one can imagine, the difficulties and challenges of leading a school with a troubled history (the arsonists were never discovered) would have been paramount in the minds of the selection committee. As Sheree said in an interview in 2005:

I took over as Principal of a heap of dirt with a lot of foundation holes and a school co-located with another high school, so that our children actually shared the learning space (and)...the grounds that we operated in had two distinct entities.

Understandably, the previous acting principal, who had lived through the trauma of the school fire, had won loyalty from the community, which might well have expected him to continue in his role when the rebuilt school opened. A new female principal, without prior experience in the role, had gender, historical and local issues to deal with, along with the challenges inherent in implementing her avowed vision to create an example of educational excellence for a 21st century school.

While her appointment was clearly strongly supported within the Department of Education, some in the local community were probably surprised by the appointment and might well have expected someone different. Sheree's vision, enthusiasm, energy and tenacity were necessary to win the appointment, and then to perform the principal role. Under intense scrutiny within the school environment and locally, she set to work to create an outstanding school in which all students could take up opportunities to reach their potential.

The new principal was very committed to listening to people, encouraging them to work through the pain of the school's past history and to seize the opportunities inherent in a new building and a new school community. The staff were listened to carefully and encouraged to take up the invitation to work with their leader in implementing a compelling vision to create a dynamic, vibrant, learning organisation.

Devastating as is the reality and symbolism of a burned down school, its replacement can only ever be an improvement. But the new principal was looking to do more than replace a ruined school; she was seeking to create something sustainable and remarkable. She was looking to build a learning community within which all parties could share experiences and grow through meaningful, learning-focused relationships. That goal certainly resonated with the values and ideals of the Essential Learnings Framework.

While Sheree Vertigan inherited a brand new, state of the art school building, and an integrated staff, all of whom chose to go to the new school, each school context has its own challenges and advantages. Is it easier to start afresh and create a new tradition, or inherit an old one? The answer depends, of course, on the character, personality, drive and vision of the leader. As one colleague expressed it, '(Sheree) could have a terrific school in a tin shed.' The colleague explained that Sheree knows how to build community and distribute leadership appropriately. Her supporters comment that she is an absolutely top school leader.

There is consistency in the strong words colleagues use to describe Sheree. One can hear the respect with which she is regarded and sense the pride colleagues feel to be included on her team of change agents. They speak of her enthusiasm, motivation, sense of social justice, knowledge of curriculum and the integrity between her beliefs and her leadership style. Reference is made to her 'pushing people out of their comfort zone', 'seeing the big picture' and daring to have different expectations of students and colleagues. Even those teachers whose personal and career expectations were not realised in a competitive situation, were encouraged to grow through their disappointment, and, with guidance from Sheree, achieve in the long term.

Sheree acknowledges with gratitude and respect those who have contributed to her leadership development, including her beloved husband, two children, family, colleagues and mentors, including those with whom she worked as a teacher and consultant in the Department of Education, and those who have provided personal and professional support in difficult times. She acknowledged her parents, and the influence of their commitment to a professional life, imbued with moral purpose and compassion for others. The loneliness of leadership goes with the territory, and in small, semi-rural communities, family life is rarely separate from professional life, no matter how hard one hopes to keep the boundaries firm. The families of community

leaders have to be resilient too.

In 2005, Sheree won a Hardie Fellowship which enabled her to visit the United States. A condition of the Hardie Fellowships in Tasmania is that the recipients spend some time researching education and schooling in the United States. Sheree visited the U.S. shortly after Hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans. While she was appalled at the government's apathy about the plight of the hurricane's victims, and surprised by some of the policies and practices in the schools she visited, she felt renewed respect for the positive elements of schooling in Australia. An unforeseen outcome of Sheree's experiences in the United States was her increased confidence that Reece High School's commitment to learning and teaching, and its discernible achievements, would compare favourably with the best anywhere.

Characteristics of successful leaders

Sheree identifies a number of leadership characteristics as key to her success. She believes that successful leaders hold themselves and others accountable for the quality of what happens in their schools. Leaders have to be clear in their expectations and involve everyone in the learning processes. They need to provide regular time slots in the timetable for a review of progress and to facilitate whole school or team sharing.

Successful leaders, she believes, must learn with their staff. If there is professional learning for teams, if at all possible, the whole school should be there and be involved. Leaders shouldn't try to have all the answers and they need to be upfront in saying, 'I don't know. How can we find the answer together?' When the leader has all the answers, then there is a risk that teachers stop thinking and stop learning. Often it is necessary to challenge the people who may have an idea about where the answer lies.

Successful leaders also learn from their staff. They encourage different teachers to take on significant responsibilities, to exercise leadership, and make presentations to their staff. They make sure that practice is consistent with the notion of creating teacher leaders; and they avoid the culture where everyone has to have a title and status in order to be considered as a leader.

Successful leaders put a premium on professional learning. They provide real opportunities in order to encourage everyone to learn and keep up to date in their professional areas, but they make sure those opportunities are not an imposition. They also link professional learning with the practical reality of the classroom. They encourage teachers to be clear about things such as: why they are doing what they do; how they are to realise the school's vision; how they are to meet set targets; and, most of all, how they are to improve student learning outcomes.

Sheree believes that successful school leaders must provide teachers and other associated staff with time to reflect on practice. She recommends using a learning-action research model, in which the school provides time for teachers to work together in teams within the teaching load of all teachers. There are clearly delineated times for such professional learning. This is seen as a first priority and an integral part of everything the school does. Teachers are encouraged to become active researchers, focused on improving teaching and learning.

Sheree points out that successful leaders are leaders of change. They need to

recognise that change will only occur when teachers have an understanding of the changes and an opportunity to learn about them. Change occurs essentially through learning and the sharing of this learning.

As a successful principal, Sheree creates supporting structures to facilitate the development of a collaborative culture in her school. These structures include: school teams at both junior and senior levels; 'teaching buddies' within the teams; and teaching buddies across junior and senior schools. She matches these with a supportive leadership structure, because she believes that no one can operate in isolation, and teams provide the support to allow teachers to take on and respond positively to new challenges. Teams trial together and support each other in times of high risk. For example, in 2002 the school had a focus on social responsibility, and in 2003 all teachers planned units of work and then used an expert group model to share and trial each other's work. When things don't go the way they expect then they take the time to reflect on why, and determine if there are things that could be done differently.

Building an innovative and supportive learning environment

Sheree clearly finds the challenges and successes of being an effective leader exhilarating, but she is not afraid to talk about the moments or extended periods of time when motivation is tested and things seem just plain tough. Inner resilience is clearly the hallmark of champions in all fields of endeavour. But even champions need to be supported by a critical mass of like-minded individuals, and those Sheree has either found or created. Principal peer-support, in the form of visits from principals of other highly regarded schools, together with their heartfelt affirmation of the quality of student engagement and the positive student behaviour they observed, help to build the principal's and school's resilience and commitment to excellence. Professional reading or professional learning experiences, such as being involved in the social responsibility project with Kath Murdoch in 2002, discovering Andrew Seaton's key abilities model, and Andy Hargreaves' leadership insights, have provided support to Sheree and her colleagues. Kath Murdoch helped the staff at Reece to learn about planning teaching for understanding, and how to develop deep and rich learning experiences. Hargreaves' (1998) work on building learning communities resonated easily with the staff and community at Reece, along with his work with Michael Fullan (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2003). A gratifying aspect of Hargreaves' work was, in part, the discovery by teachers from Reece, that the approaches he promulgates are already in evidence at their school.

Public affirmation has a powerfully motivating effect upon a school. Reece High has been recognised internationally with the Design Share award, for innovative learning environments, and the prestigious James D MacConnell award, for putting the theory behind the innovative design into practice. In the four years since the official reopening of the school, not a week has passed when the school has not had visitors from intra state, interstate and overseas. While initially the visits were to look at the facilities, now the focus is on the educational program and the provision of professional learning for other teachers. Sheree, with her colleagues at Reece High School, has worked to turn a vision into reality. As the judges of the award commented:

The redesigned Reece High School, that is strongly committed to the whole

community, represents an outstanding example of how a lost asset can be replaced, while still creating an effective 21st century learning environment. Today, the project has become a powerful national role model for civic engagement. It enhances educational opportunities for every resident, while serving as a symbol of what can be achieved when communities work together to realise a shared vision.

Sheree and her colleagues recognise the value of building positive links to the local community through student engagement with it. When a community consultation process identified the need for Reece to be recognised as a community asset, all students at Reece High were required to become involved in at least one community based project. Their experiences demonstrated the powerful role which adolescents can play in community organisations. Students are also being introduced to different leadership opportunities. Sometimes new environments outside school stimulate tacit leadership qualities hitherto untapped in school environments.

Sheree has learned much about leadership from observation and reflection, and through testing and extending her personal qualities through practice. She is now in the midst of her doctoral work, researching the topic, 'Creating and leading a school for the 21st century: a phenomenological study'.

Not all aspects of transformation are highly complex. Some are seemingly ordinary, but can have outcomes which exceed expectations. Sheree mentions the decision to change the timetable for the whole school, not just the junior school, as a change which had unexpected benefits. Initially it was thought desirable to have two structures: one for the junior school, based on trans-disciplinary study and middle school principles, and the other for the senior school along more traditional lines. However, the key abilities model of Andrew Seaton encouraged the staff to adopt the same structure for the whole school. Likewise, when teaching blocks had to be reduced from 110 minutes to 100, the time economies had no deleterious effect on student learning.

A leader with 'fierce resolve'

Sheree Vertigan is an outstanding leader whose story might well provide inspiration to others. She is articulate and very clear about her vision and purposes, so it is not surprising that others want to follow her lead, and in turn learn from her implicit and explicit mentoring. The factors in her leadership, which are difficult to convey through a written account of leadership, are: the human qualities of character, personality and dynamism. These contribute to the uniqueness and effectiveness of leaders. They really need to be experienced through interpersonal contact. One can interpret her qualities through the perspectives of empathic leadership (Arnold, 2005) and cite her enthusiasm, empathy, capacity to engage, expertise and intelligent caring as key attributes of her success. Others might cite her authenticity and resilience. Let us consider Sheree's own reflection on her leadership:

This process of transformation has been like being on the rollercoaster at Disneyland. The journey began with a slow clunking ride to the top, pulling against all the forces. We got to the top, only to come rushing down the other side, like we were out of control; but when we rose to the top again we knew we could deal with the next challenge...that same anxiety

and exhilaration cannot be found amongst the spectators...learning is not a spectator sport nor is leadership. Reece is a work in progress.

It is inspiring to witness transformational leadership in action. Sheree Vertigan demonstrates many qualities, but one worth highlighting is her 'fierce resolve'. In his impressive and influential study of high level leaders in the corporate world in the United States, Jim Collins (2001) found 'fierce resolve' was a distinguishing quality of leaders of the highest calibre. It carries leaders through difficult periods and communicates strength of purpose to others. The spiritedness informing high level leadership attests to the still ineffable power of deeply complex human beings, whose inner being is lit with the fire of a creative vision, impelled to make a profound difference to others. No one can truly account for that power, but it is exhilarating, as those working with Sheree attest, to catch its warmth and fuel its flames.

While it is hard to predict what lies ahead for Sheree Vertigan and Reece High School, she has plenty of time and many opportunities to build on her achievements, and to continue to mentor others through her leadership, commitment to improvement and global sphere of influence in a contemporary world. Ideally, her own voice needs to be heard, and her school community experienced, to understand the uniqueness of her leadership style. This written account can but tantalise.

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MOIRA NAJDECKI

Leading and Loving It

By Kathryn Moyle

Leading a large school across two campuses is a complex task, but one Moira Najdecki loves. Moira is the principal of MacKillop Catholic College in Canberra, which is a co-educational school of 1600 students in years 7 to 12. The college is located in the Canberra and Goulburn Archdiocese that has schools in both the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and New South Wales (NSW). Her role as principal is an enjoyable but challenging one that requires Moira to deal with both micro and macro issues simultaneously. It is a role that involves ensuring the physical and metaphysical foundations of the school are solid. In her view, if the fundamental values, policies and infrastructure requirements of a school are in place, then teachers are empowered to support students as they learn.

Unlike many of Canberra's population, Moira was born and grew up there. She first became a principal in 1994, is the mother of four grown children and has two Masters qualifications: one in English and the other in Educational Leadership. Moira is the first generation in her family to have continued into higher education. She views her own school teachers with fondness, explaining 'I had wonderful teachers at school'.



In the mid-1960s, Moira was in the first intake of students at the newly established Catholic Girls' High School now called St Clare's College. She reflects on her time at the school, commenting that students in the first intake of that school had some unique experiences: the classes were small; the relationships with the teachers were good; and, as the first cohort of students going through the school, they were provided with many leadership opportunities. The emphasis on

Moira Najdecki, MacKillop Catholic College, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory. Late in 2006 Moira was appointed as Director, Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn Catholic Education Office; this chapter is about Moira's work as principal.

the importance of relationships in that school continues to influence Moira in her role as principal.

It seemed natural for Moira to continue her full-time education and become a teacher: 'it was always something I wanted to do.' Moira received a scholarship to attend university, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts at the Australian National University, and a Diploma of Education at (then) Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAЕ). Moira married at the end of the year she completed her Bachelor of Arts, and then completed a Diploma of Education and commenced teaching in Canberra.

Throughout her career, Moira has balanced the demands of family, personal life and paid work, and found teaching compatible with these demands. Moira first taught at Campbell High School, in the Social Sciences Faculty, until the arrival of her first child. She then had three more children and, while her children were young, did some relief teaching. She then worked part-time at St Clare's College, where she had the opportunity to hold acting promotional positions as Year Coordinator, English Coordinator and Assistant Principal. She then attained an Assistant Principal position at Merici College in Braddon.

In 1994, Moira was successful in her application for principal at (then) St Francis Xavier High School in Belconnen, where she stayed for nine years, seeing the first Year 12 cohort through the school. She then spent a year in the Catholic Education Office of the Canberra and Goulburn Archdiocese where she worked on principal performance review panels and with Catholic secondary school principals in New South Wales. Since 2004, Moira has been the principal of MacKillop Catholic College. In the 12 years Moira has been a principal, she has received considerable enjoyment in the role and faced some significant challenges. What follows are some of Moira's reflections on being a principal, drawing on experiences at both St Francis Xavier and MacKillop Catholic Colleges.

Moira as a leader of change

Moira's work as a principal has been, and continues to be, exceptional. She has led two secondary school communities in Canberra, as they adapted to changing circumstances arising from the instigation of new structural arrangements. The common configuration of secondary schooling in the ACT, particularly in government schools, is for students to attend a high school for years 7 to 10 and then enroll in a College for years 11 and 12. At both St Francis Xavier and MacKillop Catholic Colleges, however, Moira has been involved in school communities that have developed from Year 7-10 high schools, to colleges offering full secondary pathways. Moira's involvement in these respective transitions has been at different entry points in the processes: at St Francis Xavier she initiated the change, while at MacKillop Catholic College she is consolidating the transition processes.

Changes to the structural and organisational arrangements of schools can be complex and potentially difficult matters for a school principal, because the changes invariably impact upon how the school community views itself. The physical restructuring of a school can be considered the outward embodiment of the cultural and pedagogical changes occurring within. If the changes are not handled proficiently and sensitively,

there is potential to destabilise a community.

When Moira began at St Francis Xavier, it was a high school educating 900 students in Years 7 to 10. By 1996 the demography of the Belconnen area changed and enrolments began declining, challenging the comprehensive nature of the school. Moira researched trends and collected statistics to support the examination of options for the school, and then proposed, both to the school community and to the Catholic Education Office to extend St Francis Xavier to include years 11 and 12, providing the school with the additional enrolments it required to remain comprehensive and viable. This proposal was agreed to in 1998, and it was announced that, from 2000, St Francis Xavier would accept enrolments from students in Years 7 through to 12. St Francis Xavier has continued to grow and flourish, and is now a highly successful school catering for 1100 students across years 7 to 12.

MacKillop Catholic College, where Moira next became principal, had already been merged from two schools, located on two campuses a few kilometres away from each other, on the south side of Canberra. The Wanniassa campus accommodates students in Years 7, 8 and 9, and students in years 10, 11 and 12 attend the Isabella Plains campus. While physically located on two campuses, an ongoing challenge for Moira is to build and sustain the 'identity' of a single school, where that identity is characterised by its policies, strategic plans, ethos, culture, religion, curriculum, administration and management processes.

Moira's approach to fostering the transitions at St Francis Xavier and MacKillop Catholic Colleges has been to lead and manage the changes, while simultaneously providing a sense of stability and security to the staff, students and their school communities. Indeed, over the past 12 years, she has worked consistently at establishing and maintaining conditions within these schools, to ensure positive staff morale and high quality student outcomes, while planning and implementing major changes within supported learning environments. Moira's ability to confidently juggle the complexities of establishing the conditions to achieve the planned changes, while at the same time maintaining a calm sense of stability, has enabled her to successfully lead these changes. She is able to inspire her school communities and to give them a sense of security: they can see the stewardship of their school is in good hands.

Inspiring school communities

One of Moira's guiding principles is that all schools must be, first and foremost, good places for students to learn. Irrespective of the changes occurring elsewhere within and outside a school environment, Moira's fundamental concern is that schools must be havens of learning, where students are protected from potentially destabilising influences. Moira has inspired her school communities to achieve stability in the face of complex changes, by being able to articulate a vision for the future and to galvanise support for that vision across a whole school community.

At St Francis Xavier, Moira's greatest challenges were to provide a solution to declining enrolments, by giving staff hope for the future and by providing families with a pathway through secondary school for their children. These challenges, by their very nature, were inherently popular with all concerned, and so the staff and the school community rallied around the vision of expansion. Moira inspired her staff to

contribute to the achievement of the vision for the school, and, as a result, they were enormously generous and supportive in assisting to bring the dream to fruition. Indeed, Moira makes the observation that ‘growing a school requires patience, foresight and careful planning, but it is easier than the opposite: closing one.’

At MacKillop Catholic College, Moira inherited the issues arising from the merging of two schools. The challenge for Moira has been to build on the good work of the foundation-principal in knitting together the communities from the previous schools, which were fractured and distressed, and to restore trust and optimism among these communities, while developing the identity of the new school. To this end, Moira has promoted restorative justice principles to underpin the whole school philosophy. Restorative justice places an emphasis on reconciling the damage caused to relationships when school rules are broken. Restorative justice approaches, and the underpinning philosophy of listening to all sides and addressing problematic issues in just and fair ways, pervade the school culture and require staff to have high level skills in listening and reconciliation. Moira not only believes in the principles of restorative justice but lives them in her life and work.

Moira also believes that building a cohesive school community with a shared, common identity, is, in part, fostered through the MacKillop Catholic College school motto: ‘Faith and Courage’. She has both in large measure. The school has three clear directions to implement the school motto:

- MacKillop Catholic College is a dynamic welcoming community based on gospel values;
- It is a learning environment where excellence in education is valued; and
- Members of the community are nurtured and empowered to face the future with faith and courage.

The theme for the school in 2006 was ‘let your light shine’. The school website (www.mackillopcatholiccollege.com) promotes the values and ethos of the school, stating, ‘we are encouraging all students to let their own light shine and, as quoted by Nelson Mandela, in doing so, “give permission to others to do the same”.’ The optimistic messages promoted by MacKillop Catholic College’s school motto can be seen in Moira’s demeanor as she carries these messages into her own work. Moira, too, lets her own light shine.

Know your facts and be positive as a leader

Throughout her work Moira maintains a positive attitude: ‘know your facts’ and ‘keep positive’ are two of her personal mottos. Since much of Moira’s work as a principal requires the solving of complex issues, she has developed an approach to change management that is based upon research and an understanding of the available resources, both human and physical.

Moira underpins the processes of change she initiates by gathering her own data and analysing it in the context of her school. Consultative mechanisms, such as focus groups with staff members, are used to enable their input into issues, such as what is or isn’t working, and to hear their views and concerns. The outcomes of such data collection, research, and consultation inform the development of future strategies.

Moira sees it as important that students, parents and staff all feel like they belong to their school community. She believes there has to be a very strong feeling on the part of the community that the directions being taken at the school are the right ones. At both colleges, maintaining staff commitment and morale, while introducing changes to the curricula, policies and structures of the schools, required positive leadership. Such leadership has required that Moira also be positive within herself. While maturity and experience contributes to an understanding of the role of being a principal, Moira backs up everything she does with research: 'know your facts' and 'understand the context': 'what do these mean for our school?' Knowing the facts provides her with the confidence required to lead a school community, especially when new directions are proposed.

It took four years to implement the myriad changes required at St Francis Xavier in order to increase enrolments. During this time, Moira wanted to maintain staff morale in the face of declining enrolments. Working with the staff to make changes to the timetable and reconfigure the work of the school, she avoided having to retrench anyone. All reductions in staff occurred through attrition. At the same time, however, Moira led a team of staff members, who examined the options and practical administrative requirements of extending St Francis Xavier to year 12. She personally kept a positive stance, avoided feeling threatened by the day-to-day realities the principal of a school with declining enrolments had to face, and established management structures to ensure the staff and students, similarly, did not feel threatened by the changes. In her last two years at the school, considerable building activity was undertaken to accommodate the planned new enrolments. A new mathematics block, administration area and senior common room were added, and the resource centre was extended and refurbished. The reality and the symbolism of the building work provided the school community with a shared sense of optimism for the future.

When Moira joined the MacKillop Catholic College community in 2004, the initial changes, commenced in 1998 to amalgamate two schools to form the new College, had essentially been bedded down. More recently, the challenge has been to strengthen the academic achievements of the students at the school. All school principals wrestle with the best ways to ensure students achieve to their best ability, and Moira is using student achievement statistics gathered over several years to inform this work. She is also working extensively with the Executive Team at each campus to ensure the timetable supports the curriculum offerings. A restructuring of the timetable and the curriculum is being undertaken, to ensure the eight learning areas and religious education each receive sufficient time to be meaningfully addressed, particularly in the middle school. Moira argues that this process requires an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the relevant teaching staff. The endpoint she is seeking is that, together, the timetable, curriculum, and the teaching and learning undertaken, will enable students' learning outcomes to be as high as possible.

Being the principal of a school located on two campuses brings with it special challenges. Moira has an office on both campuses and sees parents on either campus, but usually at the campus where their child is enrolled. Ensuring the interpretation of policies is consistent across the two campuses provides another example of why it is important to 'know your facts'. Moira explains her reasoning with the following

illustration: where families have children attending both campuses, any differences in the interpretation of policies between the two campuses will be obvious to these families, most likely not well received, and possibly seen as a weakness in the school. The same applies to staff. It is important for staff morale to ensure consistent, similar and equitable work practices are implemented on both campuses. Indeed, her insistence on consistency across the two campuses is in line with her abiding belief in the principles of restorative justice. One could suggest that 'facts for fairness' is also one of Moira's beliefs.

Being the principal of a school straddling two campuses has required Moira to rethink her role as a principal.

Leadership requires collaboration with teamwork

The logistics of not being able to be in two places at once means that Moira has had to revisit her own work practices. Over the past 12 years as a school principal, she has regularly reflected upon her role, and has challenged herself about her own perspectives on what it is to be a 'good principal'. While her current role is an interesting one, involving co-ordination and facilitation of planned strategies across the campuses, it has required empowerment and trust in others to a greater extent than in the past. Moira places great reliance on the executive teams located on each campus, and particularly on the two campus heads, who essentially hold roles akin to the traditional role of school principal. The two executive teams work together and one of Moira's main roles is to ensure they all 'sing from the same song sheet'. This is a role she describes metaphorically as feeling more like a conductor than a player:

I have to be able to let go. For principals of schools that span two or more campuses, the current 'rules' for principals can't always apply. I am not able to lead by walking around, for instance. It is very difficult to get to know students; I can't go into classrooms regularly; and being a teaching principal is almost impossible. This means that some of the most enjoyable and relational aspects of the principalship are simply not practical. I have had to be pragmatic and have had to decide, as much for myself as for the College, that, in order to lead effectively, I cannot always do so in traditional ways or according to current accepted wisdom.

Moira's own approach to being a principal is not one based upon her positional authority per se, but one grounded in building consensus and mobilising the talents of her staff to enhance student performance. Knowing her own strengths and weaknesses is important to Moira. She is humble about her own talents and recognises and acknowledges the strengths of colleagues. Knowing her own skills means that she can identify the skills required in other people to construct balanced leadership teams. The importance of having compatible and complementary skills sets in the teams at MacKillop Catholic College is recognised by Moira to ensure that there is well-rounded leadership provided on each campus. Her approach is one of pragmatic reality based upon her inner self-confidence and taking a strategic approach to leading and managing a large school.

Moira believes that, as well as being principal of her school, it is also important

to contribute to the Catholic school system and be a part of that broader educational community. As the principal of a large school within the Canberra and Goulburn Archdiocese, Moira provides leadership within the Diocese. She is an experienced principal and school leader and, as such, contributes significantly to committees, boards, projects, and to the professional development of less experienced principals. Moira understands that she is a role model to younger educators, both in her school and across the Diocese.

Moira claims that her time spent in the Catholic Education Office has given her a systemic perspective and to a deeper understanding of the work of a principal, as she has had the opportunity in her CEO role to visit other schools and to see how principals worked. Throughout these visits she has been exposed to different models of leadership and has made her own judgements about the effectiveness of the respective approaches she has observed.

Leading and loving it

Many influences have shaped Moira's approach to school leadership. While not leaving university with the specific goal of becoming a school principal, she has nonetheless become a highly successful principal through a mixture of talent, skill, compassion and hard work. As the principal at both St Francis Xavier and MacKillop Catholic Colleges, Moira has led complex whole school changes over extended periods of time. She has led significant structural and educational changes at both schools with purpose, sensitivity, compassion and courage.

Throughout her work as a principal, she has exercised equal measures of courage, patience and risk-taking. Balancing the interrelationships between the school and Diocesan systemic arrangements, while inspiring staff, building their morale, aligning curriculum offerings, students' outcomes and parental expectations, has required Moira to be strategic and persuasive in convincing others to join her in the directions she proposes. And she also has had the commitment, stamina and persistence to see her visions through into reality. As well, at both colleges, Moira has fostered sustainable staffing and budget structures, while promoting an atmosphere of trust and sharing.

A consistent theme throughout Moira's work as a principal has been to maintain staff enthusiasm and commitment against the broader backdrop of changes, and, at times, unrest, especially as the enterprise bargaining agreements for teachers in the Catholic sector were negotiated. Throughout all the challenges, her own self-confidence and personal commitment to the pastoral needs of her staff, students and parents in the respective school communities in which she has been a principal has seen Moira achieve remarkable changes for the better in those schools.

Moira recognises that teaching and learning, leading to high quality student outcomes, are the main foci for any school. She has successfully used evidence and data to create scenarios of possible futures for the students, the school, and the school community. Everything Moira does as a school principal is oriented toward enhancing opportunities and outcomes, for all the children under her care. She is both a great educator and an exceptional educational leader.

Moira shares her knowledge and wisdom with new leaders who will take schools further into the 21st century. Yet, even with the depth of experience Moira has to offer,

she recognises her own learning must continue.

Moirá's role at MacKillop Catholic College does not fit the usual preconceptions about the role of a principal. This suggests there is a place in the school leadership literature for research about those principals who do not hold traditional roles, or who manage multi-campus schools. Reflections by such principals may be useful in assisting others to understand how very different the roles of principals can be.

While principal of two very challenging schools, Moira has had to overcome many different situations. The word 'failure' is not part of her vocabulary. She has adopted a positive stance, focusing on ways to achieve success, rather than avoid failure.

Love of education and of students is fundamental to both her philosophy and practice as an educational leader. She is passionate about the potential positive influence principals can have on staff and students and she is committed to passing on her passion to the next generation.

It is not the fact that a principal leads a two-campus school or restructures and redesigns two schools that makes Moira special, it is the quality of person that she is: her highly professional approach to her work; her ability to create a vision and inspire others to help achieve it; her love of children and of fighting with courage to ensure they get the best possible education. It is also her belief in, and practice of, the principles of restorative justice, which she uses to help create level playing fields for all who work with her. This is what 'leading' means to Moira, and she is loving it.

10

DAVID WOOD

Creating a Young Adult Ethos

By Jan Gray

There is nothing ordinary about Sevenoaks Senior College. A first impression is of a large, modern, stainless steel and glass building with a sense of double story open spaces, glass walls and natural light. This is a relatively new college, opened in 2001 to accommodate the educational requirements for senior students living in close proximity to two local middle schools. As a purpose-built senior college, the structural design centres around a series of learning suites on two floors, each with a classroom, seminar room and computer resource area. A communal staff study with shared common room negates any discrete ‘discipline’ spaces in the school, complementing the collegial and integrated philosophy of Sevenoaks Senior College. Circling the top floor is a large library, more computer labs and learning suites. Downstairs, a large cafeteria forms a natural gathering place for the students.

At any time of the day, students can be seen actively engaging with each other in the learning suites, the cafeteria, or outside in the courtyards, talking and laughing. Although the school uniform policy is generally respected by most students, the often startling mark of individuality manifests through hair styles, footwear and nonchalant adaptations of the traditional school uniform. There is a sense of business and purpose, of ownership, and a noticeably non-aggressive atmosphere; no shouting, no confrontation. Staff and students greet and banter with each other in a friendly way. A walk through the school demonstrates that staff know the students and their immediate concerns – equally, the students know and are



David Wood, Sevenoaks Senior College, Perth, Western Australia. Towards to middle of 2006 David was appointed to the position of Chief Executive Officer at the Curriculum Council of Western Australia; this chapter is about David's work as principal.

comfortable with staff. This is particularly evident when the principal, David Wood, walks through the school. The two-way greetings and interactions are a clear indication of the mutual respect and quiet negotiation underpinning expectations for staff and student relationships in this school.

School profile

Sevenoaks Senior College is situated in an outer metropolitan suburb of Perth in a predominantly low socioeconomic area. The modern, spacious building is in stark contrast with the surrounding semi-industrial buildings and unpretentious homes. The school caters for up to 600 Year 11 and 12 students, drawn mostly from the local community but with a growing number of students enrolling from across the metropolitan area as it gains 'street credibility' with young people and a reputation for innovation and excellence in offering a less traditional, vocational and industry-linked curriculum.

A wide range of students attend Sevenoaks Senior College; from those with clear aspirations for tertiary study and entry to esteemed professions, those with vocational and industry orientations, and those who come to school as a refuge from the overwhelming behavioural, social, emotional and psychological factors that leave them disengaged and alienated because of a lack of educational and training opportunities in other schools.

The school offers a diversity of programs and delivery modes to maximise the learning opportunities for the wide range of student backgrounds and aspirations. For example, Sevenoaks became a Registered Training Organisation in order to accredit students for the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) subjects and certificates undertaken in its school-based courses.

The original goals of the school, as defined in 1999 by the Foundation School Board, were very clear: this was to be a self-managing school incorporating the principles of diversity and inclusivity, with a flexible timetable and customised curriculum heavily supported with technology. The focus was to develop an enterprise culture with specialist facilities accessed off-site through strong industry and community partnerships. Staff were to be selected on a merit basis, with as generous a staff-student ratio as possible. The Board wanted a school culture with a different way of thinking, much more sharply focussed on catering for the diverse needs of young people.

The principal, David Wood

The implementation of such goals required exceptional leadership and a staff dedicated to sharing the school's vision and working together to achieve that vision. David Wood was such a person. He was appointed Foundation Principal of Sevenoaks Senior College in late 1999 and has held that position since. This was his first appointment as principal of a school. The senior college commenced operation in 2001 and although he is reluctant to acknowledge the extent of his leadership in this role, with David as principal it has developed into an exceptionally innovative and effective senior school.

Prior to moving into educational administration positions, David held teaching

and head of science positions at a number of regional and metropolitan government senior high schools. From 1989 to 1999 he held senior Education Department and Secondary Education Authority curriculum positions managing several strategic programs including: the establishment of accreditation and recognition procedures for vocational education and training in schools; redevelopment of upper secondary technology and enterprise subjects; implementation of major course changes in mathematics and physics; gifted and talented education; technology in schools programs; and development and publication of the Western Australian Outcomes and Standards Framework.

David's experience in system-level policy development positioned him as an informed consumer with no sense of awe of system-level decision making processes. This legacy of confidence and experience served him well as he pushed expectations and ideas of standard practice, from working with the architects to design a learning-focussed building, to developing and implementing flexible school-level practices in curriculum, timetabling, resourcing, staffing, and community partnerships, whilst maintaining a clear outcomes focus.

When reflecting on his appointment, David acknowledges his initial concerns at leading the implementation of the philosophical and practical goals as defined by the Foundation School Board:

Even though I had a broad theoretical basis for establishing and running a senior school, I had little recent practical experience, which I might have obtained through being a deputy principal. I therefore had some self-doubts and was reticent about my capacity to lead the development of a senior college such as was envisaged for Sevenoaks.

There were no doubts, however, in the minds of the School Board, the staff selected by David, the community or the students who became part of the Sevenoaks Senior College community. David's key goal in taking on the exciting role of inaugural principal of the College was to work with his staff to establish a challenging and exciting school learning environment which empowered both staff and students.

Building a school culture of learning

During his period in senior administrative positions, David followed the development of some of the effective schools research that was being undertaken in Australia and overseas. He was impressed with research findings of McGaw, Piper, Banks and Evans (1992), Scheerens (1992), Wang, Haertel and Walberg, (1998), and Waxman and Walberg (1991). Drawing on this research, he determined that the factors most likely to impact on school effectiveness at Sevenoaks Senior College came down to five areas:

- the effectiveness of the leadership of both the principal and the administration team;
- the degree of parent (and broader community and industry) involvement and commitment;
- the effectiveness of teachers as supporters of young people;

- the effectiveness of teachers as teachers; and
- the degree to which students respond positively to the opportunities presented.

David believed that what was needed to establish an effective school was strategic leadership for making transparent links between policy and direction, teaching and learning, staff, partnerships with the community and resources. Easy? As David comments, not quite as easy as it sounds:

So, setting up Sevenoaks should have been as easy as establishing an environment in which teachers support young people through their advocacy role and implement more outcomes-focussed curriculum approaches; and the rest should have followed. As we all know, it is not quite so simple.

The commitment of the staff to the development of strong partnerships within the school community was a key factor in establishing a school culture based on the principles of equity, opportunity and advocacy for learning. Over the past five years this commitment has been demonstrated in a number of ways. There has been extensive conceptual work on curriculum development, with many hours of teamwork needed to integrate a school-based curriculum with industry access into feasible programs. On-going collegial reflections on school structures and practices have provided the basis for a professional community which engages in inquiry into their own practice and is open to suggestions of change. Central to this professional partnership is total commitment to preparing students for the world of work. From David's perspective, a key indicator of an effective school is empowerment of staff, students and their parents. A stock take in 2006 of the school's 'effectiveness' by the school leadership team showed significant progress in the original goals incorporating the principles of diversity and inclusivity, and identified clear directions for the way forward for creating a young adult ethos in the school.

Diverse programs for a diverse student body

It is no surprise to find that the structure of the learning environment at Sevenoaks developed under David's leadership reflects both the original vision held for the school and the commitment of the staff to a constant cycle of informed decision making through reliable data to identify effective ways to meet student learning needs. Currently there are three key programs underpinning student learning:

1. *The Canning Skills Program.* This program has four teachers and two ancillary staff working collaboratively to support about 80 students. The program focuses on re-engaging young people who have histories of severe alienation from school and challenging behaviours. Many of these students are faced with multiple high risk factors in their lives. The first phase of the Canning Skills Program consists of an integrated literacy, numeracy and information technology-based program structured around the Certificate of General Education for Adults. This allows these young people to develop their core skills to a Year 10 standard so they can enter TAFE, employment or mainstream education. Importantly, it provides students with the opportunity to build social skills, self-belief and pride, so that they can function effectively in a mainstream setting.

2. *The Industry Access Program.* There are several programs catering for a total of about 120 students. Each Industry Access Program supports 15-22 students working as a discrete group with one or two teachers. These students spend one day at an external training provider, one day in the workforce, and three days undertaking an integrated program comprising English, Vocational Maths, Career and Industry Awareness, Personal Information Technology, and Structured Workplace Learning. Each of these programs is highly contextualised to each industry area.
3. *The Mainstream Program.* This has about 350 Year 11 and 12 students studying a wide range of subjects across all learning areas. On-line learning, flexible use of time, and flexible use of learning spaces enable diverse curriculum delivery for these students.

The complexity of the Sevenoaks Senior College learning community is testament to David's encouragement of his staff to constantly develop and deliver programs to meet the identified learning needs of their students. He is passionate about this goal and he inspires those who work with him to be passionate also.

Focus on learning outcomes

The establishment of an outcomes focus to learning is a defining feature of Sevenoaks Senior College. David's championing of this is founded on his belief that students will thrive in an environment where their learning needs are clearly identified and matched with appropriate learning programs, strategies and curriculum. Operationally, in a school of 600 students, David admits this is a challenge, especially at classroom level:

There is the practical reality that life in a Year 11 classroom with 25 students is not so straight-forward. Students learn at different rates and in different ways. They have different levels of motivation, home support, background in the subject, and maturity. What happens in a classroom is far more 'diverse' and 'organic' than it is predictable.

However, despite the operational challenges, it remains David's strong belief that within the obvious limits imposed by group instruction and the extraneous personal, social and emotional factors that each young person brings to class, he and his staff should continue to aspire towards their idealistic goal of ensuring that all students achieve to their optimum level. This is a difficult challenge but David and his colleagues find it exciting, inspiring and rewarding.

In order to monitor progress towards such a goal, David has instigated a whole school action learning approach to determine, on an annual basis for each teacher, the perceptions of their students' actual and preferred learning experiences. Using this data, teachers work with the leadership team to implement strategies to enhance their classroom environment. David has a passionate belief in the capacity for new technologies to provide opportunities to customise and individualise learning within a supported environment. His goal for the last five years has been to establish an outcomes focus to the teaching environment with staff who are comfortable and

proud to be accountable for the outcomes for all the students. He has been remarkably successful in achieving this goal.

Valuing difference through personalised learning

It would be easy to underplay the level of achievement at this school, even if ‘success’ is viewed from the public accountability models of tertiary entrance rankings and awards. Sevenoaks is acknowledged in the education community as a successful school – well resourced, ‘outside the box’, and with talented staff effectively dealing with challenging students. It is further acknowledged in the broader community as a safe place to send a young person, a place where difference is embraced and learning is personalised, and where a student is most likely to gain entry to the work force, an apprenticeship or further training, despite unsuccessful school experiences in earlier years. This is a school where students have managed the transition from poor educational outcomes and total alienation, to graduation at the end of Year 12. A ‘success’ is as likely to be a student whose attendance increases from one day a month to once a week, or a student who wins a scholarship to study law at a university.

Given the diverse backgrounds of the students and their aggressive behavioural orientation, David promotes a culture of tolerance and mediation. Nothing less is expected or accepted.

Culture of mediation

As an outcome of a strong directive from the leadership team in the school, this is a school with an embedded culture of respect and professional behaviour. There is zero tolerance of confrontation in the school. It is not modelled by staff and not permitted by students. Frankness and quiet negotiation are the expected norm for management of all differences of opinion, from the board room to the class room. The school does not have the degree of aggravation and student management issues that are evident in many other schools

This culture of mediation is illustrated by the following example:

While walking down to the cafeteria to buy a coffee, David interrupted a group of boys arguing loudly. The tension amongst the group was fierce, with the potential for students to lose any sense of control. David spoke quietly to the boys to find out what the problem was, but with little success. The boys were asked to follow him to the board room. Seated around the large oval timber table, David started the quiet conversation again. The questions were asked, the conflict uncovered, suggestions mooted for resolution, and mediation achieved.

David is very comfortable discussing the philosophical and practical basis for such action. Most of these young people live in households where violence and power are an accepted means of conflict resolution. The school is one of the few places where they have an opportunity to learn that there are other, equally successful, empowering ways to resolve conflict. For David these are learning opportunities to show students

how to resolve conflict with moderation and mutual respect, in a non-judgemental and constructive way. They are also essential to ensure that diversity is respected and inclusivity encouraged.

Inclusivity, diversity and success for all students

The examples chosen by the school leadership team to illustrate progress and celebrate success are indicative of the integration of the school goals of inclusivity and diversity into all levels of expected outcomes. These successes are the outcome of hard work, staff cohesiveness and constant reflection on practice. These outcomes take time, and require a leadership team with fidelity, purpose, courage, dedication and passionate belief that all students can and will learn if provided with a stimulating learning environment, which respects their uniqueness and their specific needs. Some of the school's achievements chosen by the leadership team as indicators of progress include:

- Achievement levels have steadily increased. In wholly school-assessed subjects the school out-performed the state averages in 2004 and 2005, despite the school's position at the top of the lowest socioeconomic index quartile;
- The graduation rate has increased to 94% from a low of 83% in 2002;
- There has been a steady growth over the five-year period in the number of students obtaining full or partial vocational education and training certificates;
- The enrolment has steadily increased from 389 in 2001 to 584 in 2006;
- The number of Aboriginal students enrolled was 11 in the first-year and is 64 in 2006. Most of these students have actively engaged in their learning and stayed on at school;
- In the first year only 2 students were engaged in school-based traineeships; in 2006 there are 30; and
- System-level student satisfaction data indicates a very high level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and the way the school has prepared students to meet career goals. These compare very favourably with state benchmarks.

However, David is not satisfied. From his pragmatic perspective, he states:

Many people say we are very effective now, and in many respects we are, but there are some areas where I am sure that we could do more. Some of the elements in our framework need to be tweaked and perhaps some missing elements need to be added.

For example, despite the school's sense of success in the first five years with the level of engagement and achievement of most students, including many from highly disadvantaged and dysfunctional family backgrounds, each year there are a small but significant number of young people who simply do not engage with school. Ever mindful of his quest for educational success for all his students, David's position is that there is no place for complacency in reflecting on these foundational achievements:

In fact, we have many students who come to school, because it is a safe and comfortable environment, to meet and socialise with their friends. If only we could engage all students in their learning and get them to take ownership and responsibility for their achievements.

The Sevenoaks school community is above all else committed to establishing a young adult ethos, working on the principle that if young people were happy and comfortable they would attend school. Reflecting Collins' (1999) astute reminder to educators, there can be no learning outcomes unless the students attend. The irony for the staff is that in overcoming the attendance challenge for the small group of students with a history of alienation from school, they have created a unique engagement challenge in getting them to attend class as well as attend school. David sees this as part of the necessary ongoing change of attitudes to schooling and value of education for these students. Initially, improving attendance and retention is about the senior college becoming part of the students' accepted practice. Once attendance becomes routine, engagement in career-oriented education and training, and linking to the workplace, can begin. For students who had lost faith in the education system, and who had no mechanisms for achieving their aspirations, the young adult ethos developed by David and his staff offers a unique opportunity for disengaged young people to return to learning.

Creating a young adult ethos at Sevenoaks

Implicit within David's young adult ethos is the supported transition for all students from a dependency model of learning and having their lives managed, to becoming independent learners with the confidence and maturity to take ownership of their further education or training, ready to become contributing members of the workplace and to function as responsible young adults.

The development of an effective school in the short period of five years is the outcome of a constant focus on the development of an enterprise culture catering for young people. The capacity for the school to embrace change and professional learning in the quest for improved student outcomes has been strengthened by David's unyielding commitment to the needs of the students and their learning. He openly acknowledges that this was not always an easy process for his team:

I should declare my hand on my beliefs about change and doing things differently to improve outcomes. I strongly believe that if you want something to change then you can make it happen. I also believe that if teachers can see that doing things differently will improve student outcomes then they will willingly change, even if it causes them some short-term pain. I have unyielding faith in teachers to do the right thing by their students.

There is no question in David's mind as to his key role as a school leader. In order to make things change, the role of the educational leader is to be clear about where the school is headed and why, and to work with staff to embrace these understandings and beliefs. As educational leader, David sees his role is to set the 'conditions' that will allow this to happen. Some of these conditions are explicit in the governance of the school, others in the pedagogy of the school. However, all the expectations, boundaries, flexibilities, innovations and resources reflect the original path chosen by the School Board and activated by David.

There are four fundamental conditions embraced within the school culture, and

intrinsic to the relationships between all members of the school community and to the learning outcomes of the students. A culture of partnership, advocacy for learning, valuing and supporting staff, and accountability for learning outcomes, are fundamental to the young adult ethos established by David at Sevenoaks.

Culture of partnership

The first of these fundamental conditions is a clear culture of partnership that exists within the school. The premise of partnership is fundamental to the school ethos: partnerships within the school and within the broader community. Within the school, there is a three-way partnership between the leadership team, staff and students. As with many inspirational leaders, David has empowered his staff and his students to join with him in the quest for an effective school. The power of the partnership culture is evident in the high standard of professionalism and achievement expected and achieved. As partners in the learning journey, both staff and students have high expectations of themselves and of each other, and a strong commitment to productive learning experiences. A further outcome of this culture of partnership is a shared philosophy across the staff and student body of actively embracing and encouraging a ‘wellness culture’ within the school. For those students whose previous school experiences and on-going home experiences have been, or are, negative and often punitive, this is an enlightening experience to be valued and supported within a community. Sevenoaks is a healthy and vibrant institution.

The development of broader partnerships between and amongst staff, parents and the school and local business community, have been some of the focal points of David’s leadership over the last five years. From David’s experience, and consistent with the principles underpinning the college, the involvement, engagement and commitment of the parents, community, business and industry partners provide the background and context for the effective operation of the school. With the range of programs developed at the school under David’s leadership, the support of the community is critical to the school’s learning programs and broader commitment to community-based learning. From David’s perspective, this provides authenticity to the school-based learning programs:

Where possible we like to get students into their community because it provides a real context for learning and great opportunities to develop young peoples’ values in a very natural and authentic manner.

Advocacy for learning

The second of these fundamental conditions is the philosophical belief in teachers as advocates for learning. Under David’s leadership, a strong and personalised pastoral care system has been developed to provide the personal, social and emotional support integral to student learning at Sevenoaks. The focus is on empowering students to set goals and monitor progress, develop creative problem-solving strategies, and build resiliency. This ‘advocacy’ program is a preventative, proactive approach based on the belief that students will optimise their performance when supported by a significant adult who takes a genuine interest in them as a whole person. It is David’s strong

belief that teachers are significant role models whose capacity to shape and influence students should never be underestimated. Thus, the teacher is the advocate of learning, and each student has a teacher as his/her advocate. Parents, students and advocates develop a strong partnership. Whilst the focus is to support students as learners, the advocate also helps them deal with any issues that may be causing them to become distracted from achieving their educational and personal goals

The central aspect of the program is the strong and trusting relationship that develops between the students and their advocate. Constant and efficient communication between subject teachers, students and advocates enables monitoring of each student's achievement, allowing the advocate to assist the student work through issues as they arise.

David's belief in the power of this philosophy of advocacy is such that a key criterion for selection to teach at the school is the incoming staff member's capacity to work within the advocacy model. With his leadership team, David has developed a structure to support a more balanced power relationship within the advocate/student relationship. From his perspective, until David has evidence to show a change is required, this is one of the few non-negotiable features of the Sevenoaks school ethos. Operationally, the implementation of the advocacy program has needed comprehensive and ongoing structured professional development opportunities in order to reinforce its central place in the work of the school. As David comments:

The development of closer, more personal, yet business-like relationships, based on individual support is not necessarily a role that teachers have expertise in or feel confident pursuing. Also, as students develop a stronger and more trusting relationship with their advocate, the likelihood of disclosures and requests for support in areas not usually within the teacher's domain becomes more prominent.

The advocacy role is not always an easy mind shift for new staff, and David spends considerable time mentoring and helping staff to make the transition to relating to their advocacy group as a critical friend rather than a 'teacher'. Students are open in their clear support of the program. Annual student feedback data indicates they feel very supported in their learning and have a strong sense of belonging at the school.

Valuing and supporting staff

The third of these fundamental conditions is the development of strong staff morale and support. Staff not only choose to be at the college but are selected on the basis of their professional record as excellent teachers. Such acknowledgement of professional achievement is a source of pride to staff. David developed structures and practices within the school governance that ensured staff collaboration in the development and implementation of all school-based policies. Staff meetings provide opportunities for 'Back Chats', where staff from each program have an opportunity to present ideas and issues for consideration. Formal mechanisms are used to record and respond to the feedback. For David, the key is not only providing the structure for staff to provide feedback, but, more importantly, to be seen to value and act on the staff feedback, where appropriate.

Valuing and supporting staff is a linchpin of the Sevenoaks ethos. David sees it as essential to have an environment where staff feel they belong, are valued and recognised, and can trust and rely on each other and on the principal in times of difficulty.

Accountability for learning outcomes

The fourth of these fundamental conditions is a culture of evidence-based decision making which is regarded as essential for accountability within the school. Under David's leadership, staff regularly draw on data from within their classrooms, the school and system to identify outcomes students are actually achieving (academic achievement, retention and destination). Consistent with David's outcomes based philosophy, judgements of performance are based on 'solid' evidence. Typical of David's capacity to take an objective position when evaluating progress in his school, outcomes are constantly monitored. As he indicated:

I have unyielding faith in teachers to do the right thing by their students, but I am not sure that we are always as objective as we should be. Generally speaking, if we implement ideas or changes, then we quickly develop very strong ownership of the resulting program but are often reluctant to question its effectiveness. We need to be able to step back and analyse our student outcomes and programs in a hard, analytical manner.

Through supportive leadership, opportunities for staff to reflect and explore their own practice in a supported professional environment, and an openness to change, David has utilised his accountability model to improve practice, with improvement of student learning the hub of all outcomes conversations.

The next steps

The success of the senior college has presented a challenge in itself. In a time when the leaving age has recently been increased, Sevenoaks Senior College is a lighthouse for school communities struggling to manage the implications of all Year 11 students returning to school. The level of acceptance and success of Sevenoaks creates a new challenge – the school population is growing. The question facing the leadership team and the School Board is 'how big is too big' in order to maintain the hard-earned inclusive and supportive ethos, within a school practice of refusing no student.

Pragmatically, David and his leadership team acknowledge that unless the school can offer the students a way of learning that re-engages them with school, and provides them with transparent links to their aspirations, they will walk away from opportunities for learning. While it seems evident that the current programs are appropriately focussed for the diverse learning needs and opportunities of the Sevenoaks cohort, diversity of programs, flexible curriculum delivery and personalised learning do not overcome all barriers for all students.

David concedes that many of the factors such as motivation, home background, social, emotional and peer relationships that determine success (or failure) are considered to reside outside his school's sphere of influence:

The question now is: Are all of these factors outside of our control or can we find a different way to influence some of them? If the answer is ‘yes they are all outside of our influence’, then we should be pleased with what we are doing and accept a certain school drop-out level, mediocre performance and low academic and career aspirations of a proportion of our students. If the answer is ‘no they are not’, then we should be saying ‘what are we going to do to change things for those students?’; and I guess that this is where we are up to in our development as a college.

The answer may well lie in David’s driving passion for equity of opportunity for his students and his leadership in finding ‘smart’ ways to achieve social justice outcomes. One gets the strong feeling that David will leave no stone unturned to ensure that Sevenoaks continues to build on its substantive successes and continues to provide its students with the type of learning environment that excites, stimulates and gives meaning to their lives.

Leaving a legacy

It is evident that the implementation of the original board’s goals and dreams for the school has been realised. The challenging role taken on so successfully by David has been widely acknowledged within the education, business and parent community. The professional conversations underpinning the writing of this chapter clearly illustrated David’s passion and drive in furthering the educational opportunities for the young people in and beyond the Canning District. While David is very much at ease describing the ways he worked to empower his staff, to conceptualise innovation in curriculum, pedagogy and partnerships, he is reluctant to focus on himself. As with many successful leaders, the drive, passion and humility are evident to the onlooker and those lucky to be sharing the journey, but the unquestionable influence of their role as champion is invisible to the leader.

At the time of publication of this story, David has moved on to another challenge. He has taken on the role of Chief Executive Officer of the Western Australian Curriculum Council. Understandably, there is a sense of loss within the school community as both the original principal and vice principal have moved on to other positions within the last twelve months. Typically, David cast his farewell function as an opportunity for both his staff and the broader community to acknowledge the shared journey and celebrate their joint successes. Any discussion about Sevenoaks Senior College in David’s eyes is not about David, but always about the school – the staff, parents, partners and above all, the students.

However, when pressed to comment for this chapter, David was pleased to have the opportunity to say how very proud he was of the achievements of the school community after five years, and to have the chance to discuss the place of his leadership within this success:

I would like to acknowledge all staff for sharing the Sevenoaks’ vision and working together to achieve that vision. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of our former Vice Principal Di Turner who was very much a co-leader in the development of the College.

The greatest indication of David's success as foundational principal and testament to his leadership over those five years is the fidelity of vision that stills holds among his staff. It is inevitable that the school will continue to change, especially with a new leadership team. However, David's innovative and inclusive school with a strong focus on a young adult ethos is an established and respected institution within the community. David has made a big difference and his legacy at Sevenoaks is clearly there for all to see.

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Sr JILL HAVEY

For the Love of Learning

By Madeleine Reagan

It is more than 35 years since Sister Jill Havey became principal at St Dominic's Priory College in North Adelaide. Jill had the summer school holidays in 1971 to prepare for her new appointment and recalls feeling 'daunted' by the thought of being principal, although she says that, like most people in their 20s, she considered herself confident and 'indefatigable'. The promotion to principal was significant and there was a lot to learn for a teacher who had loved teaching English, Geography and Religious Education. Indeed, in addition to taking on the role of principal, Jill continued to teach Religious Education and Geography for some time after taking on leadership of the school.

Learning about leadership took time. It was a busy life being principal and teacher, and undertaking the necessary tasks of school administration. Jill recalls being supported generously by parents, the Sisters in her community, and the students, particularly in school holidays, when cleaning and moving furniture and equipment was undertaken with the assistance of volunteers. The school endured a tight financial position in those days and welcomed the first government grants that enabled construction of facilities

such as laboratories and libraries in Catholic schools. Gradually the number of sisters who taught in the school decreased, and this brought significant changes in the employment of teachers who were called 'lay staff'.



Nurturing an 800 year old religious tradition

Jill had been raised in a family that had had a long association with the religious tradition of the Catholic Order of Dominican priests and sisters. She had attended St Dominic's since the age of four and her parents belonged to a parish

***Sr Jill Havey, OP, St Dominic's Priory College,
North Adelaide, South Australia.***

community led by priests of the Dominican Order. Her parents encouraged learning and had a love of music and the stage. Both Jill and her brother became teachers. Jill entered the Dominican sisters when she was 17 years old and undertook her degree at the Australian National University during the 1960s.

As a member of a religious congregation of Dominican Sisters founded in England in the 1840s, Jill has encouraged and sustained the religious tradition in the life of St Dominic's Priory College. A group of six Sisters had arrived in the Colony of South Australia in 1883, and the small community had aspirations to set up a spiritual focus in Adelaide as part of the Dominican ethos embodied in contemplation and learning. Their liberal arts education background provided a strong basis for the Sisters to establish a school in North Adelaide.

Each religious congregation has a tradition and ethos that is nurtured in the community. In the case of Jill's religious community, the Dominican Sisters take their inspiration from Saint Dominic, a Spaniard who founded the Dominican congregation in France in 1206 as an Order that focused on learning and contemplation. These elements are evident in the ways that Jill speaks of her role as principal of St Dominic's.

Jill is conscious of nurturing the Dominican tradition in the school and in the lives of students. She is clear about the need to achieve a balance between study and activity:

The experience of religious, who have very active ministries such as mine, is often one of tension between the need for contemplation and the great demands of the job you are doing. In the school setting, there is also a need for balance, between the discipline of learning and being open to new ideas, and the need to interact with others, for example through sport and just having fun. If you don't get both, it is a pretty unbalanced kind of education.

Jill is motivated to find ways of 'building into the school community the spirit of St Dominic and his respect for study, learning and contemplation, but also activity.' In Jill's explanation about the Dominican characteristics of the school, there is emphasis on an energetic exploration of two companion elements: continuity and change. For Jill there is the exploration of an ongoing reinterpretation of the spirit and ethos, and finding opportunities to allow these to permeate the daily life of the school:

At St Dominic's, in common with other congregational schools around Australia, you are actually trying to maintain and develop further a tradition of learning that is your heritage, and to rise to the challenge of interpreting that tradition for each generation.

In addition to the Dominican tradition, she identifies the broad religious heritage integral to every Catholic school as central to her leadership as principal. For Jill there is a responsibility to nurture both traditions as she undertakes her leadership at St Dominic's. She has inherited not so much a personal power, but rather a 'collective power', which means that she is leading the school from a moral base that is wider than herself. This is what Jill hopes the teachers, students and parents understand as they respond to her leadership.

Profile of St Dominic's Priory College

St Dominic's is an all girls' school although there have always been very small numbers of boys enrolled in the first two primary years; 2006 marks the end of the enrolment of boys, and the last two will be farewelled at the end of the year. Jill admits to feeling sad about the loss of the boys. There were close to 600 students enrolled in 2006, with 170 in the primary years and the remainder in Years 8 to 12. Jill acknowledges that it is a 'moderately-sized' school, and there has been a deliberate decision to maintain the ceiling at 600, partly because of the restrictions of the small site, as well as the commitment to provide excellent facilities. The other major advantage of the size of the school is the opportunity it provides to 'know' students. Jill emphasises the pastoral care focus of the school and acknowledges that parents often say in enrolment interviews that they are attracted to the reputation St Dominic's has developed over generations, for caring for, and supporting, individual students.

The profile of the school is changing. The Dominican sisters had consistently welcomed students from other countries and backgrounds into St Dominic's. In her time as student in the 1950s, Jill recalls that there were significant numbers of students from refugee families who had arrived from Europe after World War II. Jill has continued the tradition of building a multicultural school community that she identifies as a significant feature of St Dominic's, and would name this as one of her significant achievements. She recalls accepting the Vietnamese students, whose parents were in the first group of boatpeople in the late 1970s. The school now welcomes girls from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Africa; 'a great richness'. Recently there has also been an initiative to establish links with China, and a small number of Chinese students are enrolled, with home-stay arranged by the school.

The curriculum is broad and comprehensive. The majority of students complete Year 12, and a large proportion go on to study at university. Changes to the curriculum in Jill's time as principal have resulted in an expansion of the range and breadth of subjects, and the need for up-to-date facilities. She sums up the changes by saying, 'everything has opened wide'. Over the years since Jill has been principal, the Dominican Sisters have negotiated the handover of their convent buildings and this has allowed for increased facilities. A recently completed building program is evidence of change. The library has expanded and there are new facilities for languages and school administration.

Jill speaks with great energy of the need for enjoyment in education, which must also be balanced with the discipline of learning. St Dominic's has maintained a strong culture of providing co-curricular activities in the performing arts, sports and service programs. Jill speaks of the excitement of prospective students and parents at the enrolment interview as the focus turns to discussion of co-curricular activities. She also admits to her own delight when she watches the responses of students as she turns the pages of the school's information booklets. These include outlines of the various activities, including camps, musical and dramatic performances, debating and sport.

Jill's philosophy: 'I am at the service of teacher and learner'

Jill communicates clearly about her role, which is predicated on a strongly defined

philosophy about leadership in educational institutions:

At the heart of my sense of the role I play as the leader of St. Dominic's, is my commitment to foster a strong and respectful relationship between teacher and learner. In the first place, this is done through example, but also it depends very much upon the selection of staff. I can confidently say that the staff of St. Dominic's share a belief that their role is to nurture the whole person; to provide for students the experience of balance, in which the intellectual, the physical and the spiritual all have an important part to play. So, the staff, who have this daily regular contact with students, are a school's precious resource. I have played my part in establishing a strong staff community.

Through her continuing commitment to teaching, she not only connects in a tangible way with the work of the teachers, but also with the joy of teaching. She comments:

The fact that I have retained, albeit as only a small part of my job, the role of a subject teacher, has given me a stronger sense of the pressures upon the teacher and the learner. It has also given me a 'hands on' acquaintance with new methodologies and technologies. This teaching has also provided me with some of the exhilaration that goes along with being with students.

Opportunity is a theme that threads itself through discussions with Jill. She speaks about the kinds of opportunities that have enabled her to make decisions about planning, and she has delighted in seeing the construction of new buildings and facilities. She refers to the opportunity of employing and retaining generous and committed staff members, who have collaborated in the diverse responsibilities of providing education under her leadership.

Leadership: A rich source of opportunities

The innumerable relationships she has formed during her years as principal provide Jill with a rich source of opportunities. She has witnessed very significant events in the lives of families, whose daughters and sons have attended the school. Jill talks with admiration of the Vietnamese parents, who risked nearly everything to come to Australia as refugees. She refers to the tragedy of a student, who died after a short illness earlier this year, and describes the ways that the school community was able to take this opportunity to support and comfort the family and friends. Jill tells the story of an old scholar of 104 years who visited the school after 85 years, and was interviewed by a small group of senior students. The woman went on a tour of the school and did not recognise the majority of the buildings, because they had not existed in her time as a student. The old woman spoke about the need to be authentic and to be oneself; qualities that Jill would like students at St Dominic's to hold dear.

Perhaps one of the most valuable ways for a principal to take hold of opportunity is to influence the design of the environment in the school. Jill recalls hearing a principal of a state school, located in a disadvantaged area in metropolitan Adelaide, explain that it was imperative to develop the aesthetic environment of a school, in order to provide a sense of beauty for students. This is an aspect of creativity that can be exercised by

the principal: ‘...a big opportunity here, you are the leader in shaping an environment... you are shaping a place where students learn and environment is very powerful.’ Jill notes this same quality in the cloisters and in the planning of other spaces, and the landscaping within the school grounds.

Waiting for the first interview with Jill gave me time to appreciate the attractive space of the new office and reception area. It is light-filled, welcoming and pleasing in its proportions. A deep night-blue wall provides a focus for visitors, a sense that this is a place that reflects the combination of contemplation and learning. These are two essential characteristics of Dominican education identified by Jill.

A place for contemplation and learning

In any school, the library is a focus of learning. At St Dominic’s, this is certainly the case, and more significantly because the library area has been recently extended. Jill sees it as an absolutely critical centre of the school: ‘It is a place where people meet and more than one age group can be enjoying the resources together . . . a place where media is enjoyed, where magazines are read.’

The library is central in the life of the school. At one end of the library, there is a display of books made by primary students, with one jewel-encrusted, while another is a large picture book with a cover and colours to delight. A third is open on a stand inviting more than a second glance. At the opposite end is a vast selection of resources including periodicals and texts, and in between, an area set aside for technology. The whole atmosphere is welcoming and light, and offers a sense of delight in the activity of learning. One of the most significant aspects of the renovated library at St Dominic’s is its northerly aspect, that draws in light and brightness, and contributes to the enjoyment of being in a place of learning.

If a place in a school can communicate joy, exhilaration and delight, then, for Jill, this place at St Dominic’s is the library. A history of the Sisters and St Dominic’s published to coincide with the school’s centenary, outlined details of early arrangements about opening the first school (Burley & Teague, 1993). There was a very interesting reference to the presence of a library. When the first Sisters were farewelled from England in 1883, a benefactor donated 50 pounds to purchase books to establish a library on their arrival in the colony. Such a generous sum would have provided a large number of books with which to begin a library. The donation allowed the Sisters to open the first public lending library in North Adelaide. Some of the books from this period still exist, have been catalogued and are retained by the school. Clearly, the idea of a library, a locus of learning and meeting, a space for holding and disseminating resources has a long history at St Dominic’s. The idea of a library holds a strong place in Jill’s mind and heart.

Jill speaks of the role of the school library in the future. She agrees it will house even more technology, but books will still provide the opportunities for students ‘to rub shoulders’ and connect with other people. Jill sees that it is through relationships that people learn and explore ways to understand what they are learning.

Future challenges at St Dominic's: The need for social analysis

Jill looks to the future and imagines the class of students, who are currently in their first year of school, and what they might experience in 2020. What will their future hold, and how does a school like St Dominic's provide an education that will assist them to negotiate their adult years? While she admits to this being a challenge to imagine what their reality will be, she speaks of some of the challenges they will face:

The world that they have inherited is a highly damaged environment, and is an insecure place. They are living in a country that is not making welcome refugees, and which is still working on the deeper issue of reconciliation for its first inhabitants. Then you have the problems of water in our dry country. I don't think you can ignore those wider social issues when you look at the future of any child in this country. It is no good being gloomy, but I reckon that young people of this time are going to need more courage, more strength, more resilience.

One of the ways in which young people can come to face these issues is for schools to teach the practice of social analysis. One of the inspirations for Jill in this context is an English Dominican Sister Sheila Flynn, who has travelled in Australia in recent years and conducted sessions on Dominican characteristics of education. Sr Sheila lives in a shanty town outside Johannesburg in South Africa and works with communities affected by HIV Aids, teaching skills that will assist them to become self sufficient. She herself is an artist, a strong public speaker, and a facilitator of students and adults in retreat and workshop settings. On her recent visit to St. Dominic's, Jill noted the powerful impact she had on senior students, in assisting them to face up to global issues and in fostering the skills of social analysis, which teach awareness of the causes of injustice, and the possibilities for change:

Education is the key. Young people have to know. They cannot be protected from what is going on...the older they get, the more they must understand, if they can, of the world and its complexities.

Sustaining life as a principal

Two overseas study sabbaticals have enabled Jill to develop personally and professionally. Jill studied Theology in California in 1981-82, and undertook a Masters Degree course in Liturgy in London in 1997. Both experiences gave her a sense of restoration and the opportunity to reflect, an activity not usually available to principals. The discipline of meditation is another way for Jill to bring balance to a busy life dominated by decision-making, and to provide the energy that is necessary to engage with the demands of each day of school.

Jill finds it essential to keep alive the energy in herself, and she also wishes this for her staff in their teaching. She finds ways to express her creativity through the rituals that are part of school life, and has played a vital role in the group that shapes celebrations in the school: 'I find it exciting every year to think of how we will bring together the theme that we want, with our community and our parents.' Jill defines her creativity and good physical health as attributes that have enabled her to manage

and enjoy the role of principal. She reflects that, at the heart of it, she is a person of 'limitations and strengths' and always endeavours to improve on what she has done.

Of course, in the context of 35 years as principal, the subject of the future is raised. When asked about her own future, Jill answers by referring to the experience of students, who are leaving school after 12 years of study:

People often ask me what I will do when I move on from my role as principal of St Dominic's. In some ways, it would be helpful to outline some specific plan, as we so often do with our school leavers. Possibly, I am very like those school leavers for whom the future is very uncertain! I do not have firm plans. What I can say is that I hope to be able to contribute in a meaningful way to society and I am open to what the future holds.

Exhilaration and the role of principal

When she thinks of her role of principal, in terms of 'exhilaration', Jill provides a number of perspectives:

Perhaps part of the exhilaration is the sense of being on a roller coaster. Mondays! It is like you are starting life all over again. I do enjoy it, but in all honesty, it is more like a roller coaster, because you are rushed from the trivial to the very serious and everything in between. I am never quite sure what each day will bring, because, although you have things in your diary, it is terribly unpredictable what will actually happen, particularly true in an environment of young people. It is often very unpredictable.

Jill speaks of her love of, and exhilaration at being part of, occasions when the school community comes together. Perhaps the most significant opportunity is when the community celebrates events, such as the annual Gala Day organised by students, or at the end of year celebrations, which always involves preparation for a Mass.

As Jill reflects on what it is that gives her energy and vitality, she refers to her contact with students, both in the classroom with senior students and the relationships she forms with students in the course of the activities in the school. She states:

Young people are energising. You cannot help but be energised and, even if you are worried about how you are going to go in a class, when you are actually with them, it is a wonderful experience, because they are so into life. Being with young people is, by nature, exhilarating!

Jill is invigorated through her role as principal in other ways, including her pride in the integration of students from different cultural backgrounds into the school population. She has consciously wanted 'to create a highly multicultural community', and the opportunity of bringing together young women from over 40 cultures has added to the vitality and strength of the school. The focus on belonging to 'the community of St Dominic's' is a significant feature of the school, that is built on the commitment to support individual students.

Another example of the stimulation that Jill receives as principal is the positive relationships she has with the teachers, students and their parents, as well as with

members of the St Dominic's Priory College Board. There is a strong feeling that Jill nurtures a complex web of relationships, which are developed in the processes of education, and the 'wonderful excitement of learning.' Jill speaks of having 'privileged access' to people and their life stories, as families connect with the school whilst their children are at St Dominic's. The old scholars are an active group, who support the school and the work of the Dominican sisters, and Jill enjoys interacting with this group. Her love of communication and the opportunity to understand the uniqueness of the individual person, provide Jill with a strong purpose, and also much pleasure. Jill suggests that 'You don't seek exhilaration. You experience it but you don't go looking for it.'

As a way of summarising the transient concept of exhilaration in her life as principal at St Dominic's, Jill clarifies that it is derived from many sources. What are these elements that provide exhilaration and continued motivation? There is delight in relationships; the teaching and relating to young people; opportunities to employ staff members, who are gifted and passionate about their work with students; the conscious shaping of the environment over the years to provide aesthetics and fine buildings and facilities; and the occasions when the whole school community can reflect together and celebrate the achievements of a year. Over 35 years, Jill says that she has not looked for exhilaration, although she has certainly experienced it as principal:

In the role of principal, you are, by definition, at the centre of communication with parents, staff and students. This place is sometimes the source of difficulties and frustrations, and, at other times, it is the source of joy and exhilaration. You will experience both!

It is obvious that she maintains in herself energy and enthusiasm for the role, for the love of learning, and the continuing growth of the school. Jill is conscious that she can 'pick up and develop' this momentum, and it is this that she acknowledges is her connection to the Dominican tradition, and inspires her to continue to comment to St. Dominic's Priory College, 'for the love of learning.'

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LEONI DEGENHARDT

Reinventing Schooling for the Twenty-First Century

By Leoni Degenhardt & Patrick Duignan

Loreto Normanhurst was founded in 1897, in what was then a relatively uninhabited area about 24 kilometres from the centre of Sydney, and is now a leafy, affluent suburb in the upper North Shore. The school is part of a national and international network of schools in the tradition of Mary Ward (1585-1645), an English woman who founded the Catholic order of religious sisters, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM), also known as the Loreto sisters. The school's buildings and facilities, situated on the 12 hectares of land purchased in 1896, range from the original heritage buildings, traditional classrooms from the 1960s, the aquatic centre and a modern learning resource centre completed in 2000, through to flexible learning spaces completed in 2004 and 2005. Student artworks cover the walls, together with framed copies of the school's Mission Statement and awards won by the school, its students and staff.

But the buildings are not what are important about this school. Rather, it is the sense of happy energy that exudes from its students across Years 7 to 12, all girls, and the passionate professionalism of Leoni and her staff in supporting the growth and learning of the students and themselves. The school is academically non-selective. Its students range in academic ability from the highly able to those with significant learning difficulties, and so their needs vary greatly.



A walk through the corridors at break times reveals much friendly interaction between staff and students. Visitors to the school frequently comment on the 'warm feel' of the school, the friendliness and courtesy of the students, and the atmosphere of engaged learning. There are also many opportunities for having fun together,

*Dr Leoni Degenhardt, Loreto Normanhurst,
Sydney, New South Wales.*

such as staff-student sport matches, debates, committee work and concerts, and for supporting each other through the ups and downs of life. The importance of ritual and celebrations is accepted by all as part of what makes Loreto Normanhurst special. Students, parents and staff express a sense of pride in the school in conversations with each other, with those outside the school, including potential families and staff members, and in annual anonymous surveys. When asked what they most love about their school, invariably students will respond that it is the ‘spirit’, the sense of feeling proud of, and being part of, a vibrant and accepting community.

About 21 percent of the school’s 900 students are boarders, almost all from country New South Wales. The boarding school is central to the school’s identity, since Loreto Normanhurst was originally established as a boarding school only, as a service to country parents. It is also a feature because the school operates ‘24/7’, with some 200 people in residence during term time. Day students come from a wide arc of surrounding areas, which include well-established, elegant suburbs and newer, relatively affluent suburbs, and small acreages. A growing number of students commute daily from up to fifty kilometres away. Typical of the suburbs and rural areas from which the school draws its clientele, only about six per cent of the student enrolment comes from language backgrounds other than English.

For almost one hundred years of its existence, under the direct leadership of Loreto sisters in the role of principal, the school had enjoyed a solid reputation in the local community. However, by 1994, there were signs that the school had become a ‘cruising school’, inward-focused and comfortable. It was in April 1994 that Leoni Degenhardt took up the role of principal at Loreto Normanhurst as its first lay principal. Her immediate task was to get to know the people and the culture of the school and to work with the school community to identify the school’s future direction. The school has been on a future-oriented trajectory ever since, impelled by its values and the need to ensure that its young women are helped to develop as ‘whole people’ for the 21st century.

Leoni’s story

Leoni has been in and around schools and studied education for almost four decades. She counts herself fortunate to have had experience in a wide variety of schools, including Montessori and primary, and a range of government, independent and Catholic secondary schools in rural, urban and suburban locations. A dynamic person, whose energy is sustained by a passion for young people and for learning, as well as a personal faith, Leoni believes implicitly in the work of teachers and the role of education for the common good of society. A core belief, that education is about personal and community growth, led her to work with her school community to develop not only a new holistic paradigm of schooling, the Loreto Normanhurst Student Growth Model (LNSGM), now in its fourth year of implementation, but also a ‘continually reinventing culture’ within the school.

Yet she is often bemused by where her life and career journey have taken her. Sometimes students ask Leoni whether she always wanted to be a principal. She always chuckles at this, as it is so far from what she ever imagined for herself. She recalls a straw poll taken in a lecture during her Diploma of Education year at

Monash University in the late 1960s, when she estimated that she would probably remain in teaching for a maximum of five years. Like many women of her baby boomer generation, she anticipated leaving paid employment once she married and had children. She did marry and now has two adult daughters, but the experience of motherhood sharpened her views on education. Leoni has always loved learning, but her reading and experience, when she and her husband, David, were founding parents of a Montessori pre-school, reinforced her transition from being a teacher of a subject to becoming an educator of young people; helping young people, not only to learn, but also to develop their humanity.

After being mostly an at-home mother (a time she values deeply), Leoni returned to full-time work in 1983 as a classroom teacher in a Catholic girls' school in suburban Sydney. Her previous teaching had been in coeducational government schools in Victoria and New South Wales, in rural and suburban locations, at primary and secondary levels, and at an independent girls' school in Melbourne. Her career advancement, once she returned to teaching, was rapid. From Acting Head of Department in 1984, she was seconded in 1985 to a regional office of the Catholic Education Office (CEO), Sydney, where her role was to assist seven schools to implement Commonwealth Government funding from the Participation and Equity Program. This was designed to assist school communities in lower socio-economic areas by increasing parent and community involvement and student retention. Although the funding program was discontinued after Leoni had been in the role only nine months, it gave her a better understanding of the needs of disadvantaged communities, insights into a wide range of approaches to leadership, and an emerging educational philosophy, which saw education as the means for individual development and community betterment. This philosophy led to her membership of Disadvantaged Schools Program Committees and underpinned her work in her next role, as deputy principal of an inner-city Catholic school between 1986 and 1990.

During her time there the school expanded from being a Year 7-10 to a Year 7-12 school. A personal challenge for Leoni was that several of the cultures strongly represented in the school were noted for their lack of respect for women in authority. But this challenge became an opportunity, as she realised that gentle assertiveness and quiet confidence, exercised by a woman, could be highly effective in potentially volatile situations. This learning has influenced the way she has brought up her own daughters, her views on girls' education, and the way she tries to lead.

After periods in the head office of the Sydney CEO, and as principal of a large co-educational Catholic high school in south-west Sydney, Leoni took up her position as principal of Loreto Normanhurst. At first, Leoni was unwilling to consider an offer to go to Loreto Normanhurst as principal. However, after a 'conversation' with Loreto personnel, in which she had reluctantly agreed to participate, her heart was won over. The Loreto philosophy of life and education, emanating from the foundress, Mary Ward, centuries before, resonated so well with her own - a focus on social justice; a valuing of the intellectual; an emphasis on education of the whole person; and a passionate belief in the capacity of women to contribute significantly to both Church and society. As Leoni said to the then Chair of the School Council, she was looking for a 'life work'. Since taking up the role of principal of Loreto Normanhurst in April

1994, she has found all of that and more.

Leoni describes her role as ‘the best job in the world’. Being principal of Loreto Normanhurst links her passion for learning, for working with young people, and for God. Her religious faith is a central part of her life and gives meaning and a sense of purpose to who she is and what she does. These values have inspired her to be an agent of change within her school and have also sustained her in the challenges of the role of principal and change agent. In fact, it was a desire to live out the school’s inherited values that was the basis of her ambitious attempt to ‘reinvent the school.’

Why reinvent a good school?

In 2000, at Leoni’s urging, the Loreto Normanhurst school community began a strategy process. The new strategy process involved extensive consultation with staff, parents and students. Strategy was defined as ‘Vision directed at what we want to be, not how we’ll get there’. The Strategy, which was adopted in 2001, reflected the school community’s decision to develop a new paradigm of schooling and to strive to become a ‘continually reinventing’ school. No-one, least of all Leoni, had anticipated that the end result of the 2001 strategy process would be so revolutionary. As a result, in mid-2001, Leoni decided to undertake a PhD study in educational leadership, so that the school’s reinvention would be theoretically grounded as well as documented and analysed. While this decision added to her existing heavy workload as principal and change facilitator, it also assisted her in making sense of the complex issues related to major change within a community.

In fact, the strategy process required every single aspect of the school to be reviewed, every assumption challenged, huge amounts of creativity, energy and effort, enormous goodwill on the part of staff, and equally great amounts of trust on the part of students and parents. Through this process, the school community gradually came to the conclusion that the school needed to:

- revolve around students rather than around subjects;
- be concerned with the growth of individuals and communities;
- be values-based, and those values needed to be clearly articulated; and
- enable young people to thrive in a constantly changing world.

It was generally agreed that the existing model of schooling at Loreto was no longer relevant in meeting the needs of the students in the Knowledge Era. The school needed to change, and to keep adapting to changes in its internal and external contexts. As one staff member explained it, ‘we need to be a continually reinventing school’. It became apparent to Leoni that the school needed to develop a new holistic paradigm of schooling, which later became known as the Loreto Normanhurst Student Growth Model (LNSGM), and also to change its own culture, attempting to become a ‘continually reinventing school.’ Both of these tasks emanated from the constant interaction of the school’s enduring values and the identification of the present and future needs of young people, and girls in particular, which Leoni emphasised in the 2001 strategy process, and which she continued to promote and support through the school’s reinvention process.

Leoni provided the leadership for every one of the twenty or so strategy workshops

in which school community members – staff, parents and students – were confronted with the realisation that almost every sphere of life in the Western world is changing. Changes associated with the knowledge era were identified: in particular, its speed, its innovation and its constant openness to new learning. The school community saw that a new set of basic skills was needed which would balance economic imperatives with social needs. In Leoni's view, such skills develop nimble, creative yet critical minds as well as empathy, self-awareness and tolerance. The new paradigm of schooling, which would incorporate development of these skills and attitudes, would prepare the students of Loreto Normanhurst to be active shapers of the world of the 21st century, in the spirit of Mary Ward.

Changing the learning paradigm: Growing individuals and communities

The development of the LNSGM was gradual. It began, and continued, with processes of discernment, in keeping with the school's Ignatian spiritual traditions. Countless hours of thought, discussion and debate on this new learning paradigm took place over several years, and still goes on. For Leoni it meant sleepless nights, and the agony of responsibility. The school was already a good school. 'Why fix it if it isn't broken?' was a question many people raised. 'What if it didn't work?' But Leoni plodded doggedly on, convinced of the 'rightness' of the new paradigm in meeting the needs of young people in a constantly changing world. The research showed this, many government initiatives supported it, and so did the majority of the school community. The excitement and commitment of many teachers buoyed her up. Indeed, there were some who said, 'I've been waiting all my professional life for something like this.' Finally, having been painstakingly, and often painfully, developed since 2001, the LNSGM was first implemented with Year 7 students in 2004. It will be fully implemented across Years 7-12 by 2008.

In Leoni's view, the LNSGM provides for the acquisition of skills and values for living as a 'fully alive human being'. It is based on a holistic 'FACE (Faith-Academic-Community-Extra-curricular) Curriculum', in which every single aspect of school life, like a hologram, reflects values; academic learning and skills; an emphasis on community, pastoral care and emotional intelligence; and opportunities for learning and activities beyond the classroom. Lifelong learning skills, including information literacy and technology skills, seen as essential elements of 21st century learning, are developed in specially designed Integrated Learning programs, across Years 7-10, and these have been endorsed by the NSW Board of Studies. Within these programs students undertake holistic tasks; long-term projects in which they progress from developing the skill of asking the right types of questions, through the processes of finding, critiquing and organising information, to crafting data-based responses.

'Radical new pedagogy' – student-centred, carefully scaffolded, and based on authentic curriculum, interactive pedagogy and authentic assessment (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) – underpins the work of learning and teaching throughout the school. Leoni has always seen the value of using technology to connect people, to access 'just in time' information and to enable learning experiences which put learners in control of their learning. At Loreto Normanhurst, technology plays a pivotal role in learning, communication between staff, students and parents, and

the recording and retrieval of student and staff work. Each student and staff member has not only a school email account but also a 'MySite', where documents can be developed, shared and stored, on the school's intranet.

The school community is especially focused on, and concerned with, the ongoing work of 'growing individuals and communities'. As Leoni explains, this leads to a strong emphasis on relationships, community development and the embedding of emotional intelligence training in the learning programs. A strong 'house' structure, together with an adviser system, helps this to happen. One-on-one student-adviser conversations, in which a student reflects with her adviser on her growth and learning, and her goals and challenges, within the framework of the FACE curriculum, are conducted several times each term. There is also an expanded role for parents in their daughters' learning. 'Plenary meetings' are conducted with parents twice per year. These are led by the student, who articulates her learning and speaks of her goals and her challenges. The emphasis is on knowing each student well, building strong connections with parents, and developing confidence, self-awareness and responsibility in each student.

Leoni herself strives to know each one of her students. She enjoys being part of learning in the school, loving nothing better than to wander into one of the new flexible learning spaces, sit down with students in an armchair-filled discussion area and talk with them, or pull up a chair and join a group working together on a problem, listen to its ideas and tease out its thinking. She especially enjoys 'Morning tea with Dr D', (Leoni has her doctorate) where small groups of Year 12s meet with her for juice and muffins and the conversation ranges over a vast number of topics. Leoni feels privileged that her students are comfortable to talk with her so candidly and trust her with their views, hopes and fears.

Overall, the learning paradigm is intended to assist individuals and the school community in growing towards the school's mission, which 'encourages each student to fulfil her academic and personal potential', 'celebrates a joyous Christian faith which grows from reflection and leads to justice', and 'develops independent, articulate and compassionate women of integrity.' Leoni believes that the school's whole educational endeavour needs to be strongly and clearly values-based and she works tirelessly to achieve this end.

Leoni's commitment to staff

Leoni speaks with admiration of her colleagues on the staff and of their incredible dedication, talent and commitment to the students. She believes in her staff and in supporting them through a wide range of professional development opportunities. The 'Loreto 5 Innovation' enables teachers to apply for one of five 0.2 parcels of release time for a whole year. Here, teachers work together on a particular aspect of professional practice, currently focusing on differentiation of curriculum and pedagogy, which is to be shared with other colleagues. Teachers can also apply for the annual teacher scholarship, which Leoni introduced in 1999, and which provides \$5000 towards the cost of overseas travel, to study an aspect of education related to the school's strategy. She also places high value on teachers working together in teams and ad hoc or substantive committees, of which there is a wide range within the school. She believes that such teamwork honours the professional expertise of teachers, ensures

that the best ideas ‘get on the table’ and builds commitment to the school’s direction and values. Leoni also cares for her staff as people, with rich lives beyond their work. Life events and successes are celebrated, support is provided for those in need and there are opportunities to enjoy just being together as a staff community. This care for staff has been acknowledged externally. Each year since their introduction in 2001, Loreto Normanhurst has won an Employer of Choice for Women Award (EOWA), in acknowledgement of the supportive work environment provided for female members of staff.

Challenges in leading change

Leoni believes that the greatest challenge of principalship is in keeping a balance. Balance between the needs of students and parents and those of staff, in times when parents are more involved and often more demanding than ever before. Balance between meeting the requirements of external bodies and the needs of the students and school community. Balance between the increasing compliance issues facing schools and the need to focus on the core purpose and function of the school. Balance between keeping the dream and making sufficient compromises to make it work in reality. Balance between pragmatism and a commitment to values-based decisions. Balance in knowing when to bend to others’ expressed needs and fears, and when to hold firm on a direction. And, balance between one’s personal and professional life, particularly in the age of ‘24/7’ email access, which enables a far wider spectrum of people to have immediate access to the principal, including (delightfully, Leoni adds) even the youngest students.

A naturally reflective person, Leoni has pondered over these issues. There were times in the process of reinvention when her levels of self-doubt and fear became almost paralysing. These times coincided with periods when she and other members of the school’s leadership team bore the brunt of the negativity from many people, and in which there was considerable industrial unrest as roles and structures changed. Her doctoral studies, which she completed in 2006, enabled Leoni to understand that these were natural consequences of people’s attempt to cope with major changes

She felt, and still feels, an abiding sense of responsibility for her colleagues and for the school. Having committed to the community-derived direction for the school, Leoni’s past experience made her aware of the importance of following through. As the Strategy moved from being a wonderful idea towards action, people’s uncertainty and discomfort increased. The year 2003 was, in the view of each member of the leadership team, the ‘annus horribilis’. People were afraid. Some parents were afraid that their daughters would be ‘guinea pigs’ in the new learning paradigm; some staff were afraid for their jobs, or that they might be found wanting in the new arrangements; some were close to retirement and were not keen to embark on major change. It was high risk for the school, and for the principal, personally and professionally. Leoni speaks with deep admiration of the courage and resilience of her colleagues during the year prior to implementation, and of her gratitude to those within and outside the school community who sustained her in these darkest times.

Leoni believes that staff commitment is what has ensured the success of the implementation of the LNSGM - commitment to the students, to the school’s values

and to effective learning. She considers the strength of the school is in the spirit and commitment of the community and the willingness of so many to 'walk the extra mile', going way beyond the call of duty to meet the learning and welfare needs of students. She cannot speak highly enough of her leadership team, a group of gifted and dedicated individuals, who accept joint responsibility with her for the health and development of the school community, and who are given and accept a high level of autonomy in leading their own particular area of school life, such as the boarding school, or pastoral care.

In many ways, the most important changes within the school have been intangible. Changes in the attitudes and outlooks of those within the school community - such as increased tolerance of ambiguity; greater trust; a willingness to share, leading to teaching becoming a public rather than a private activity; more teamwork; increased professional discourse - all provide evidence of an immense cultural shift within the staff and the whole school community.

Leading a cultural shift: The importance of values

As a result of the reinvention process, teachers have expanded their understanding beyond a traditional subject-based approach. Parents appreciate the new paradigm, and students have become better learners, confident thinkers and problem-solvers, taking more active responsibility for their learning. The school is well on its way to embracing a holistic, skills-based paradigm, which, as well as valuing traditional subject disciplines, also fosters the development of self-awareness and community, and integrates faith perspectives into every aspect of school life.

The active involvement of parents in the education of their daughters, and the development of a shared language of metacognition are further examples of the less tangible impacts of the reinvention process. Others include the capacity-building that is evident within individuals, and also on inter-personal and organisational levels. Leoni has played a crucial role in this cultural shift. While she is seen by the school community as determined and demanding in setting expectations for the education of the students, she is regarded as someone who empowers and enables others. So much change has been possible only because of deeply held and frequently articulated values within the school community.

The school's values, as a Catholic school within the 400 year tradition of Mary Ward, were pivotal in creating a touchstone and basis against which possibilities could be judged. The values which Mary Ward practised and preached - love of Jesus, freedom, justice, sincerity, verity, felicity and a profound belief in the capacity of women - provided inspiration to the school community as its members struggled with change issues. Leoni frequently refers to the symbol for infinity - ∞ - to describe the constant hermeneutic interaction between past, present and future. The school's inherited values had to be reinterpreted for new times and places. Mary Ward's personal example of liberal thinking, breadth of vision, foresight, and risk-taking provided further inspiration. The pejorative branding of Mary Ward as a 'dangerous innovator' in 17th century England (Cameron, 2000), became a source of inspiration for this 21st century Australian school community as it sought to reinvent itself. Her courage, perseverance and unwavering faith, in the face of so many hardships associated with

major change, was a source of personal inspiration to Leoni when change-related difficulties arose, as they invariably do.

Leoni sees her commitment to the values of the school as being core to her contribution to Loreto Normanhurst. In her recent appraisal, school community members referred to her as an inspirational leader, a woman of faith, who models the values of the school and who loves the students, working hard to do what is best for them, and encouraging others to do likewise.

At the start of the Strategy process, Leoni made a commitment to the staff that she would see it through, that she would not leave them halfway through such huge changes. Too often she had seen leaders make a great start, and bring people with them in support of an educational innovation, only to leave before it had been embedded. Leoni has lived up to her commitment and demonstrated resilience in not losing sight of the community's vision under the pressures that change imposes. Members of her school community noted her courage in this, as well as her ability to articulate, and keep articulating, the 'vision', so that people did not lose heart. Leoni sees that her willingness to learn and to admit mistakes has also been valuable in making a difference in her school.

The principal making a difference

Leoni believes that one of the most satisfying aspects of the principalship is being given the chance to make a real difference; to be able to help make a deeply held philosophy become more fully expressed in reality. In her case, Leoni's comfort with the values of her school have enabled her to work with the school community to live these values in ways more suited to the needs of 21st century students. While the school will always be changing and adapting in a 'continually reinventing' approach, and the work of the Strategy is still unfolding, she feels the new paradigm is now becoming institutionalised. She feels great pride in her school and in her own efforts in leading change, although it will be up to others to judge how well she has done this, and how worthwhile it will have been in the long-term.

Leoni believes that one of her key contributions was building into the school's culture the idea that everything is connected; that learning and pastoral care and extra-curricular activities all interact to help form a whole human being; and that a faith perspective gives purpose and meaning to people's lives and should imbue everything that happens in her school. Values are inherent and provide the firm baseline in times of enormous change. Leoni is also proud of the strong focus on students as whole human beings, and that it is acceptable to claim, without embarrassment, that at Loreto Normanhurst 'we love our students'. 'Young people need to know that,' she says.

Leoni continues to believe that being principal of a school is the best job in the world. But you have to 'love what you do and be passionate about it.' In many ways, being principal is more a 'calling' than a job, as it demands every part of one's being, and only if there is an authenticity in one's motives and values can the role be carried out well.

Not many roles offer such a diverse range of opportunities and call for such a wide range of skills. School principals are involved in an extraordinary number of human interactions each day, and usually have little control over their time. They also have to

make decisions in an increasingly fast and chaotic environment.

Leoni believes that leadership is synonymous with change. It is the work of managers to keep things 'working according to plan', it is the role of leaders to discern how a school or organisation needs to adapt and change in order to meet changing needs within and beyond itself. Leaders must always be able to adapt, without losing sight of the original purpose and direction. Indeed, one of the most important steps in a change process is to remain open to differing and/or conflicting opinions, and to keep searching for forums for dissent to be expressed and heard; even though it is difficult to balance the need to be flexible with the need to keep true to the original vision which inspired the decision to change. Despite the best plans, the context within which reinvention occurs is constantly changing, requiring innovative responses to new needs and situations.

A further factor is that the reactions of people, even those whom a leader knows well, and with whom s/he has worked for a long time, cannot always be anticipated. Yet it is the quality of relationships which essentially determines the health of the school community and which will largely determine the outcome of any change process. Leoni has developed a model of leadership to assist principals to cope with such a change situation; She refers to it as 'contemplative-reflexive leadership for reinvention'.

Contemplative-reflexive leadership for reinvention

Leoni suggests that 'contemplative-reflexive leadership for reinvention' facilitates the dynamic of adapting to constant change, through continuous engagement in authentic relationships based on core values. It acknowledges the need for leaders, in particular principals, to be in touch with their own 'self', aware of their strengths and weaknesses, able to feel, and therefore to empathise with others, able to articulate the values which influence them, and open to their own ongoing transformation and growth as human beings.

Leoni believes that the principal needs to be the 'leading learner' of the school who must at once inspire sufficient confidence in the school community if members are to find the courage for such major change, and also be open to deep listening and learning. Learning of this type is humbling, as it is undoubtedly the result of making mistakes, learning from them, and acknowledging the learnings made. This process of contemplation is pivotally important. Yet the contemplation needs to be enhanced by additional consideration, which is derived from values, as well as from the literature, from the insights of fellow-practitioners, and/or from a spiritual tradition. This is in order to avoid the risk of falling into a narcissistic rut. In other words, both contemplation and research are needed.

Contemplative-reflexive leadership is based on reflective and reflexive action. In the fast pace of 21st century change, no one can provide definitive answers about how a given community needs to adapt. Every community needs to do for itself the hard work of thinking and experimenting to discover the answers for itself. Hence, the core aspect of contemplative-reflexive leadership for reinvention is the element of reflexive interactions. These are interactions with others, with ideas, and with new structures and processes. Values also play a pivotal role in both the interactions and decisions made.

The dynamic involves carefully reflected thought, trying out a solution or course of action, critiquing its effectiveness against the values and aims of the community, and then adapting, in an ongoing cycle of tentative trialling, reminiscent of Fullan's (1998) 'ready, fire, aim' analogy. For Leoni, contemplative-reflexive leadership provides a way of respectful, relational, values-based, research informed and action oriented leadership for leading change in a rapidly changing context.

Principals need to be 'high-hope people'

Leoni believes that educators, and principals in particular, need to be active contributors to the community and to the wider social discourse on education and community needs. She has been, and continues to be, involved in a wide range of committees and interest groups concerned with education and social justice, which she sees as a way of sharing the richness of her own privileged role and life experiences. She encourages her own school community to do likewise. 'Beyond our walls', a phrase often heard at Loreto Normanhurst, urges people to look beyond the confines of their own lives and circumstances and to identify with and support others in need. Leoni believes that, unless current students and graduates of the school make an ongoing contribution to community, in any of a wide variety of ways, the school is not authentically living out its mission. She encourages her students to be women of depth and substance, who make the world a better place.

Especially, Leoni thinks principals need to be 'high-hope people' who inspire hope in others and care enough to keep making schools better for young people, and the world better for everyone. But it is equally important to enjoy life and to delight in young people for who they are in the present moment. She was both delighted and humbled by the comment of a parent who viewed her in this way, 'I see Leoni as a strong and courageous woman but it is [for] her humanness and her ability to have a vision, to care, to join in, [to] share special understandings and smile and laugh with the girls that I admire her.' Leoni plans to keep on doing all of that to the best of her ability. She is, indeed, a high-hope person.

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GARRY COSTELLO

Schools are Four Walls Surrounding the Future

By Louise Bywaters

Adelaide University's Elder Hall was full, the doors were closing early and the audience was buzzing with anticipation at yet another feisty debate as part of the 2005 Adelaide Festival of Ideas. This session was about boys and their education, and the panel comprised a number of distinguished luminaries on the topic.

The initial draw card was the controversial and colourful expatriate Australian feminist, Germaine Greer. The erudite Philip Adams, journalist and public commentator, was there, as was a person many of the audience knew little about, Garry Costello, Principal of Mount Gambier High School.

A small contingent in the audience attended to provide moral support for Garry. What a daunting task, to hold your own on a topic, as part of such a high-powered discussion. We were anxious for him, yet exceptionally proud at the same time. There was no need for nerves. When it was Garry's time to present, he flew! No notes, no hesitation, just passion, pragmatism and an absolute wealth of knowledge and experience, research and learning about young people that had the whole hall spellbound. The applause was thunderous and the contributions of the others receded into the wood paneling of that hallowed hall. He had gazumped even the doyenne of international voices about the construction of gender and had made sense of the dilemmas facing boys as they emerge into adulthood. He had also suggested how best to educate them for a safe and happy future. He had shone as the supreme professional and, at the same time had presented as a really ordinary, genuine man, who talked to the hearts and minds of those who were listening.

Afterwards, he was anxious to know 'was



*Garry Costello, Mount Gambier High School,
South Australia.*

that alright?', in his usual self-effacing way. He could still not believe he had actually been asked to contribute to the program, and, in characteristically humble manner, was still a bit stunned and unsure of what he had just done.

Indeed, he had demonstrated a deep professional knowledge about young people, and presented an impassioned plea for people to rethink their approach to the youth in their lives and to take care of boys, particularly during the fragile years of adolescence. There wasn't a person in the audience who would not have willingly enrolled his/her child in his school. He was clearly 'for kids.'

A reluctant leader

Garry Costello is the 2006 Australian Principal of the Year. This is a prestigious national award for principals from all sectors and levels of schooling, presented as part of the Australian Government National Awards for Quality Schooling (AGNAQS) with the Mount Gambier High School community in working towards a 21st Century culture for the school, and re-engaging its young people with a passion for learning and a quest for success. He had, in the jargon of the industry, 'turned the school around.'

Mount Gambier is mid-way between Adelaide and Melbourne, if you take the long, slow and very scenic route along the Coorong, through the Coonawarra and then down through the pine forests and farms of the south east of South Australia.

Garry's school serves a regional population along with another public high school, a Catholic college and a number of primary, special education and early childhood settings in the region. 'The Mount', as it is affectionately called, is a good place to teach, and has a strong community with a population that is increasing in diversity, thereby creating new challenges for the school.

Garry has not always had a high profile within education. Indeed, the very notion of self-promotion and ambition are an anathema to this man, who would rather sit down with a group of students and chat about their weekend than keep a lofty and disconnected presence from the comfort of the principal's office.

The acceptance of the call to take up executive leadership was a long time coming. Unlike many leaders, Garry never assumed that the principalship was a natural career pathway. A colleague indicated that Garry was reluctant to develop his career further and take on whole-school leadership through the principalship. It was only the persistent encouragement of respected mentors that brought him to the point where he finally prepared an application and began the journey to appointment.

He recognised the principalship would require deep commitment over a substantial length of time, including absolute dedication to make a genuine mark on the school and fulfill the mission of the Principalship. It would need reform of the curriculum, teaching and the culture of the school to better engage students. He also understood the tradition, culture and centrality of Mount Gambier High School in its community. It was a very symbolic and important position within public education and carried significant prestige and exposure right across the community.

He had seen others undertaking the role of principal, who had been intimidated by the level of intensity and the workload required. He also had great respect for those colleagues who had preceded him and worked along side him. His role models and mentors were hardly more difficult to emulate. Garry was hesitant and apprehensive

that he might not have been what the school needed, and was very conscious of not taking on something that he would not see through. His personal integrity, a real respect for the role, and his concern for the well being of the school community in the long term made his decision difficult. However, he saw the role as an honour and a privilege, one not to be trifled with, as it could have an enormous impact on the community.

Garry's ambivalence was also due to a very real understanding of the shift he would make socially within his professional peer group as he assumed the power and authority he needed to exercise in the position. His understanding of this significant change in his professional life and status was mature, and allowed him to move with courage and assertiveness. He approached his principalship with the determination that, when he did take it on, he would do so with some clear messages about building the self determination and self respect of all within the school's walls, in order to change the way people, staff and students thought about themselves and others.

Once the decision had been made, he was excited by his victory in what is always an emotionally gruelling competition of merit selection. He was 'as keen as mustard.' He was also humbled and daunted by the enormity of taking on one of South Australia's most notable regional high schools. Most importantly, he was an insightful learner and quickly established himself as a professional colleague and a leader of learning in the school.

Garry is now well into his second tenure as principal. As a novice principal, he performed at a level that one would have expected of the most experienced and wise leaders in schools. The proof of his success is in the recognition the school has received under his leadership, the respect it holds in the city of Mount Gambier and the pride the staff and students have in it, as one of South Australia's most celebrated public secondary schools.

Garry's leadership philosophy: Place students at the centre

So how did he do this? Garry began his first principalship with a well thought out leadership stance and held onto that for the duration of his appointment. The elements, each based on very clear values and a personal style that was tough, respectful and determined, became the principal's lodestone. They were measuring the depth of expertise and commitment required to make good and sustainable change, and, at the same time, sustain quality professional relationships.

The elements of his leadership philosophy and style emerged as consistent mantras that were used at every opportunity. The first element was a deep respect for students. That respect meant Garry built commitment among the staff to the vision of 'a school where nobody fails.' To do this, he says he had to 'place the learning and care of students at the centre of all decisions.' The school was transformed from the old metaphor of a factory to a new concept more akin to a studio, where learning could be personalised and the unique needs and talents of students could be built upon.

He worked on developing a culture of success, where every one works to his/her capacity and potential, challenging others to strive harder and aim higher; where no young person is allowed to fail; where safety nets are routinely used to scaffold those most at risk; and where those more able or advantaged are challenged to achieve

extraordinary goals. He demanded that relationships be driven by respect and care, and that no child ever be spoken to or treated disrespectfully or violently.

He promoted teaching excellence as the key to individual student success and overall school productivity. Most importantly, there were high expectations for students' behaviour and, when things went wrong, young people were engaged as an integral part of the solution making.

Garry led changes with a focused and relentless passion that gradually had staff agreeing to a plethora of new initiatives that were designed with, and for, students. He knew that he was working on a complex and unpredictable system and that he would have to work on a number of fronts, to ensure that wholesale culture change, as well as changes in practice, would result.

Some people didn't want to change of course, so Garry patiently worked with those who found the reform work beyond them, or couldn't cope with the messiness or the changes in relationships between staff and students. Some left, but the majority took on the challenge and made the school one of the most widely talked about high schools in the nation.

A community of voices

Ensuring that staff, students, parents and members of the community had a voice in the way the school was evolving was the key to Garry's long-term agenda. He had the courage to remove the blinkers from the eyes of the school, and to invite and take feedback 'fair and square', and then to create something different for students as a result. Consultation, ideas generation, and criticisms were all part of the process of getting the community engaged in reculturing the school and making it a success-focused and caring place where young people felt valued and successful. Garry speaks about facing the truth:

We had to continually consult and listen to our community; to confront the brutal facts; to always act in the best interests of students; to never worry about who received praise or credit for improvement; and to encourage our community to explore and articulate the tensions, fears and chaos, which are an inevitable part of dramatic change.

That meant a completely different way of relating to the community, and a greater level of genuine engagement and reciprocity on the part of both the community and the school. He knew he had to do things differently, and that he had the role of engaging with the community as the chief executive of a large community-service organisation. Rather than keep the school isolated from day-to-day interactions with the community, Garry decided to take the school right into the heart of it. Strategic and symbolic leadership outside the school gate was the key to success in this endeavour.

Garry hosted a community forum involving over 200 business and community leaders, parents and students, where he outlined the future of schooling, the needs of the community in the 21st Century and the need for the community to re-think the way it related to the school. He invited feedback about new ways that the school and the community could work together with students in creative and more experiential ways.

Garry appreciated that community attitudes were being driven by past experiences

and history, so he determined to influence the way the key community groups related to the school. He is now seeing the benefits of this effort, as young people are gaining precious vocational education and training, making important social connections and getting credit for both academic and community based learning. In the first five years, the school established a dynamic international program with partner schools in the United Kingdom, Japan, Thailand and Italy. Also, student clubs were revitalised to cater for new interests and changes.

Evidence-based change

Mt Gambier High School has compelling data about student attendance improving, and the rate of student suspension decreasing; both indicators that not only are students happier at school, they are achieving better social outcomes and building more harmonious relationships. This is borne out by a sharp increase in retention rates for final year students, from 31 per cent in 1997, to a high of 83 per cent in 2004, with virtually all graduates going on to further study or employment.

The data indicates that there has been a dramatic improvement in senior school results, with failure rates dropping from seven times the state average to 0.8 percent, and well below the state average in 2004. A higher 'pass' rate across all subject areas in years 8-10 and a substantial increase in the number of 'A' grades has also been recorded.

Externally examined subjects have also seen a dramatic change in student achievement, with the number of 'A' grades rising from 6 in year 12 in 1997, to 159 in 2004.

A number of very proud families have travelled to meet Her Excellency, the Governor of South Australia, as students are recognised for merit achievement in year 12, with in excess of 50 merit certificates presented in the period 2004-2006, and more importantly, strong achievement across the student population in all other subject areas.

These were just a few of the milestones that the school could use to measure how things were going, and measure is what they did. If there was effort involved, it was measured and the performance of students, the quality of the services to them, and the productivity of classrooms were all focused upon.

Most importantly, the school itself went through substantial beautification and renovation, giving the students pride, and the community reassurance, that their high school was well tended and looking as good as its new reputation claimed. The school was back as a focus of community pride and respect.

A focus on learning to learn and curriculum redesign

It takes more than reputation and cosmetic improvement to really embed the culture and reputation of a school in the psyche of its community. Significantly, the school joined the 'Learning to Learn' project and began the process of reframing approaches to teaching, based on inquiry and professional development. Working with the new knowledge that was emerging in the cognitive sciences and applying that to pedagogy, staff ensured that students were well placed to be successful. The engagement of

students became a focus and, as a result, attendance improved and students became more connected. This required sustained effort to maintain momentum and substantial structural work was needed at the heart of the learning program.

The redesign of the whole school curriculum was not easy work. Garry's role was to establish processes and work with the curriculum review team, led by Assistant Principal Mary-Anne Fenwick, to ensure the review findings were clear and explicit to staff, and, especially to the curriculum coordinators, who were encouraged and supported, but also made accountable for change. This was a complex task, in a culture where discussions about learning were rarely previously undertaken and where the lack of student ability had been frequently used as a reason for poor academic results.

The challenge was for teachers to rethink the way they viewed and managed the curriculum, to allow a great deal more flexibility and creativity to emerge at an individual teacher and student level. It was confronting and challenging, starting what Garry called 'our adventure into constructivist curriculum, which built on what the students knew and what they could do, as well as on the new partnership with the community in order to deliver that.' The goal was to move towards a student-centred and constructivist curriculum, one that was more achievable and engaging for students, and one that would make teachers and teaching more productive and fulfilling.

Staff also undertook the construction of niche courses that were offered as part of the reformed curriculum. These included vocational education and training, as well as programs addressing the particular needs and interests of individuals or groups, such as dance for boys or multi media. The school production became a living curriculum and special TAFE certificates were offered in music and film making. Nine different specialist sports programs were established and, most importantly, a mentoring and monitoring system was put in place to ensure there was a safety net for every at-risk student attending the school.

Shared values and vision as a compass for action

Garry is quick to qualify all the accolades about his work. He is adamant that a principal only builds on what has gone before, and is reliant upon the people around him or her, particularly the teachers, administration and senior staff, who work with the principal in the interests of the young people they serve. He is particularly grateful to long serving staff he substantially relied upon to drive through the changes that were imperatives for renewal of the school. He has great praise for former deputy principal Ian Gould, for assistant principals Toni Vorenas and Mary-Anne Fenwick, for business manager Steve Bolton and secretary Heather Barry. He is adamant that his success was dependent upon their creativity and commitment to re-culture the school in harmony with the school's agreed values. He is also committed to ensuring that his leadership team members share a common belief in their professional mission, and have an understanding and appreciation of the incredibly privileged and influential role they play in students' lives. The work the staff did together in developing a shared values and vision statement underpinned every relationship, and was used as the road map and compass in the reform journey that they had all undertaken.

This is particularly significant when young people are struggling with lives limited by disadvantage, abuse, lack of a strong, extended family and of other significant role

models and positive influences in their lives. The values framework enveloped these young people, and formed the basis of the mission the school has endeavoured to fulfil, which has been the core focus of Garry's leadership. His advocacy for the students and their need for an empowered future; working with staff to demonstrate respect for all; appreciating the lives of young people, seeing the potential within them, respecting their struggle and working with them as members and citizens of the school and wider community: all are central to his leadership success.

The commitment to active stewardship and service to the community is a hallmark of Garry's leadership, as is his respect for others. When did this philosophy emerge in Garry's life? Where did he learn the so called 'soft' skills that build trust, commitment and ownership, even when he has to do the tough and confronting tasks that others might shy away from?

Influences that shaped Garry

He points to the great influence his own personal upbringing as a young country lad had on his mission as an educator. With his brothers and sisters, Garry was raised in the mid north of South Australia. He grew up in a family that had a strong Irish Catholic background. He had the benefit of a large, loving family with rural 'battler' parents, where, to quote Garry, 'life was often not easy for my parents, but they ensured we were all cared for and nurtured.'

The Costello house was always full of children, 'theirs' and everybody else's.' There was always room for one more, and his parents were willing to reach out to those who didn't live as happily or safely as their own children. His parents were also determined that their children would have a better education than they did and saw public education as the means for improving the opportunities for the future.

A strong philosophy, that, 'if life is OK for you, you then really have an obligation to lend a hand to those who are struggling,' has shaped the social justice foundation that Garry builds his leadership upon in the school. The lessons shared, through the lived example of his parents, of child centredness, respect, care and social justice, are now clearly the cornerstones of his leadership. Keeping young people involved in education for as long and as successfully as possible, is, as far as Garry is concerned, an imperative for future success.

It is this foundation of inclusion, and the knowledge that education is the means to improved social and economic outcomes, that has led his work to be so focused on advocacy for students at risk of leaving school. One of Garry's most emotionally rewarding moments was the letter he received from a bright, young, Aboriginal woman, who was the first Aboriginal graduate from year 12 in the school. The letter is one of those treasured artefacts that will stay in his top drawer for the rest of his life.

Garry and the teaching team at the school work hard to align student relationships and curriculum development, and they focus on these simultaneously. 'We never see 'curriculum' and 'welfare' as two separate entities and have always had a strong social inclusion agenda.' Staff priorities focus on respectful relationships, real support, and safety nets for the most at risk students. A 'no fail' culture and a shared commitment to the notion of the school as an integral part of the village that raises children in a society, are both important drivers of changes in the school.

A culture of 'high performance professionalism'

The key to Garry's leadership success is his commitment to building a culture of 'high performance professionalism.' He is adamant there is no room for complacency and lack of engagement at any level in the school. The priorities are on professional excellence, quality classroom teaching, and interactive relationships and engagement in the process of authentic inquiry, communication and support with, and for, students.

Garry sets high standards for himself and has a commitment to his own learning and improvement. A colleague described him as having:

...an avid and unquenchable curiosity, he continually explores new, exciting and progressive ideas. He is a rigorous and a critical thinker, continually testing ideas for improved practice. In a way, this inquiring mind and thirst for improvements is renewing and energising to a person like Garry.

Modelling the way for others, Garry has embarked very publicly on his own learning plan, making it explicit, and ensuring that people hear about the things he is engaging with. He also initiated two formal reviews of his performance, involving the staff, students and community in providing feedback to him.

The establishment of a formal performance management procedure, which ensured every staff member received quality support, professional coaching and opportunities for learning, as well as genuine feedback, was initially a potential stumbling block for Garry. Once again, genuine commitment to including teachers in the decisions, and giving the power to staff to work on a design process, overcame initial concerns and ensured a supportive, efficient and personalised process of performance management was established.

Garry is proud of a process which is now embedded in the culture. Staff all have regular, structured 'professional chats', routinely collect feedback from students, and develop and work on individual growth plans, which are reviewed each year. Performance management is now seen as an opportunity for professional growth and a way to ensure each person is valued and supported in his/her work.

Sustaining and reframing his principalship: Importance of teamwork

Living the life of a school principal, and taking a position as a significant community leader in a regional city, meant experiencing isolation and loneliness that Garry had not previously experienced in schools. Fortunately, his partner in life also works at the executive level in an allied industry and there is great congruence in the nature of both their management and leadership work. Study materials from one member of the partnership are often used by the other.

Connecting with others with similar levels of responsibility has helped reduce the impact of the lack of preparation, training, reading, formal mentoring and coaching that Garry had experienced in his new role as principal. Developing peer-group support is regarded by Garry as crucial to ongoing leadership effectiveness, and the mental and physical health and wellbeing required to sustain a principal over the long haul. Before his appointment as principal, Garry had rarely been involved in a principals' conference or professional association activities, so his network of experienced principals was

very small and limited to peers he teamed with at his induction program in the first weeks of his appointment. These friendships were to become critical in his first few years, as he navigated his way through the complexities and challenges of the role.

Garry goes to pains to make the real power in his leadership very clear. His leadership team and the capacity and professionalism of his staff are fundamental to the success of the school. The strength is in the team; collaborative action and deep dialogue, a shared mission and real leadership density drives his school. To quote Garry:

Schools are not solo performances, they are works in progress if you like, where everybody has a part and a voice, and where high expectations make good schools work for students. 'We couldn't do it without the team all pulling together.

The future

So what is next for Garry Costello and Mount Gambier High School? That is the challenge for the future, but, as Garry knows well, the process of school improvement is an elusive one, and whilst the school, the staff and the students are riding on the crest of a wave of exciting success, unless there are renewed commitment, fresh eyes and a genuine critique of the existing practices, that wave will be unsustainable. The challenge is to begin that process again and again, never settling for complacency and routine.

Given Garry's passion for students and their learning, as well as for the school's special place in the community, it is clear that he will continue to challenge and inspire all the school's key stakeholders to work together as a team for the greater good. Garry has worked creatively, diligently and with great energy to put Mount Gambier High School 'on the map' as an excellent school. He continues, through his leadership, to shape the school for an exciting, rewarding and productive future. Garry captures his intentions very well when he quotes the words of Roland Barth: 'Schools are four walls surrounding the future.'

14

JOHN FLEMING

We Can Be the Best

By David Gurr

Inspired by his first principal, who made John Fleming literacy coordinator in only his second year of teaching, John knew that he wanted to be a principal. He is passionate and driven in his quest to make a difference to the lives of children, and so it was natural for John to want to be a school principal. After 15 years as a teacher, carefully selecting experiences that would help him to lead a school, John became the assistant principal (1992) and then principal (1996) of Bellfield Primary School. Bellfield is a small (220 student) government school in a high-poverty suburb of Melbourne. In 2006 John was appointed as head of the K-10 Berwick campus of Haileybury College, a large (more than 2500 student), high-fee, independent school in Melbourne. The contrast between these two schools is dramatic. Yet, and this is perhaps the central feature of John's work as a principal, his passion, purpose, mission and fundamental views about education remain the same - to ensure that the children are provided with an environment in which they can do their best. For John, being a principal is important: 'When I became principal I was really happy and felt like I didn't need to go anywhere else.' John stayed at Bellfield for more than a decade and turned



the school around from one where enrolments were declining, student behaviour was poor, and 80 percent of students were underperforming, to a school that has increased enrolments by 40 per cent, where student behaviour is exemplary, and learning outcomes are comparable to the best. John's work in transforming Bellfield Primary School has been the subject of independent research and commentary (Caldwell, 2006; Gurr, Drysdale, Di Natale, Ford, Hardy & Swann, 2003), and has received various awards both for the school (State and National Literacy Awards in 2000, Herald-Sun/Monash University Teacher

John Fleming, Bellfield Primary School (1992-2005), Haileybury College (2006-), Victoria.

Team of the Year Award in 2000), and for John (Fellow of ACEL, Victoria; finalist in the 2005 Victorian Department of Education and Training Excellence in Education Awards for School Leadership; Bruce Wicking Award for 2006 from Learning Difficulties Australia; National Literacy and Numeracy Week 2006 Special Achievement Award from the Department of Education, Science and Training). This chapter provides a brief portrait of this inspirational principal.

Overcoming disadvantage: 'It's cool to succeed'

John's time at Bellfield was characterised by a passion to prove that social background had nothing to do with educational achievement. Bellfield Primary School was established on flat land at the bottom of the Heidelberg hill, 10 kilometres from Melbourne, just prior to the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. The games village grew around the school, and, after the Olympics had gone, provided low-cost public housing. These are important features of the school – it is at the bottom of a hill that leads to a more affluent area, and most of the families that are served by Bellfield Primary School have little money (during John's principalship approximately 80 per cent of families received government assistance, 56 percent were one parent families, and 20 per cent were from non English speaking backgrounds - in a system of over 1600 schools, fewer than 20 schools had higher levels of poverty). An independent review of the school described it as one of the most disadvantaged schools in the state. It would be easy for this school and its community to be crushed by the poverty that surrounds it. If you were to visit the school, viewed from the outside, there is not much to distinguish it, as it looks like a well-maintained example of a school built in the 50s. This neat façade does convey a sense of care, yet it gives little indication of the extraordinary school that Bellfield became.

Whilst the physical presence of the school is appealing, the standout features are associated with its reputation for excellence, especially with regard to literacy development in children. It has gained a reputation for excellent literacy programs, with results comparable to most other schools, despite the challenging circumstances experienced by many of the students. Statewide literacy tests place Bellfield students in the top ten per cent of Victoria, an extraordinary accomplishment for a school in such challenging circumstances. The school also enjoys enviable success in other areas such as its sports programs, where it has consistently performed at a high level in bat-tennis, a type of tennis played with wooden bats on a small asphalt court.

A walk through the school shows an energised, engaged, and happy community of learners. Students smile, classrooms have many adults involved, the walls are alive with displays of student work. At lunchtime, bat-tennis covers much of the asphalt play space, senior students are involved in helping other students, teachers are chatting to students - there is activity everywhere. This is a pleasant place to be. A safe place. A happy place.

The school community – students, parents and the wider community – are unanimous in their praise for the impact that John has had on the school. During the times I have visited, John would be there to greet you with a warmth and energy that was immediately comforting and engaging. There was a big smile and an enthusiasm that was contagious.

The story of Bellfield, and of John's time as principal, is of an absolute and irrefutable belief that students and staff can reach for, and be, the best. An example is John's conviction that all students can be independent readers by age seven. It did not matter to John that many of the students at Bellfield came from families that struggled with daily life, let alone were able to provide the home support that schools typically need. John knew from his past teaching experience, and from his knowledge of the research literature, that this could be done. John's gift is that he is able to translate his knowledge and skills to transform a whole school – in the case of Bellfield, from a poor school at the bottom of the Heidelberg hill, to a high performing school.

Creating a safe and nurturing environment

When John first came to the school, student behaviour was poor. The school was neither physically or emotionally safe for students or adults. Without this safety it was difficult to expect that much learning could occur. A first task was to develop a climate that was physically and emotionally safe. The physical side was helped by developing an agreed whole school approach to working with students. High expectations, developing pride in the school, and celebrating student achievement, both academic and non-academic, all helped to make the school emotionally safe – students could speak-up, could succeed in academic pursuits, with support rather than ridicule from their peers. Bellfield was on its way to becoming a school where it was 'cool to succeed'.

The pathway was never easy however. Many students came to school ill-prepared for the day. Many had inadequate food, or had to exert a level of care for their parents that was beyond their age. Intervention orders against violent parents were sometimes necessary. Nevertheless, John, and the school community, provided a non-judgmental, supportive, high expectation environment. The teachers knew that they provided a safe and nurturing environment, which, for some students, was a sanctuary from an otherwise chaotic and troubled life. They were also able to influence the home environment. For example, they were able to get most families listening to their children reading at home. The school developed a home reading scheme that did not rely on parents being able to read to their children; the students would practise their reading at school before they read to their parents. This gave all parents the confidence to support the school's emphasis on reading and students received positive feedback from their parents.

John has a very hands-on approach to being principal. At Bellfield, he was always actively involved with the students, whether it be supervising and training bat-tennis or participating in camps and excursions. He continuously sought to expand the world of the students. An example is where each year he would organise to take a group of students to a Friday night football game. He would hire a bus, drive the students to the game and then, to ensure all the students got home safely, drive each student home. Not only did the students get to see a game of football live, but the care shown in bringing each student home was a powerful symbolic statement about John's work and the beliefs that drive the school.

Talking to students reinforced the image of John being everywhere and involved in everything. He was well loved because of his involvement, and for the care and respect for students that this demonstrated. John genuinely enjoyed his time with the students at Bellfield. As one student noted, his job 'is to look after us all' and another said, 'he

is so friendly that sometimes you forget he is a principal.'

John's educational leadership: Four pillars

John was actively involved in all aspects of school life. He was the driving force behind the success of Bellfield. Part of the success of the school was in John's clearly articulated beliefs about important aspects of school. It is perhaps best to let John explain this:

The school is here for the children to learn to their full potential. The curriculum side is very important – teach kids at their level. Social skills are very important for our kids – solving problems by negotiation and not aggression. The ethos of the school is based on two people: Canter's work on assertive discipline is important. In terms of managing the kids the emphasis is on effective relationships with the kids. All teachers have a very good relationship with the kids. The kids know that they are valued and respected. Slavin's work on whole school improvement is also important. The curriculum needs to be structured and explicit. It is clearly mapped out for teachers what is expected in terms of curriculum. Not only what students will learn, but also how they will learn it. Teacher responsibility to the kids is important, as is accountability to the principal – monitoring performance is important for both students and teachers. We are data driven, we benchmark the kids performance, and report regularly.

John's clarity of purpose and process is perhaps best illustrated by the approach to literacy development used at the school, with its strong focus on explicit instruction and the development of phonemic awareness.

We believe in explicit instruction – we will teach kids how to do these things. Our kids are very strong readers, very strong spellers. They are strong spellers because they know how to break words up into parts and they know what letter-sound combinations come together- very strong on phonemic awareness and very strong on phonics.

John was unapologetic about this approach and he expected all teachers to be doing this. The whole school was focused on what John calls 'the four pillars'.

We needed to get our pedagogy right and we needed to get our vision right and that is one of the things I did from the very start. In our triennial review in 1996 there was the data – more than 80 percent of our kids were failing. We needed to revamp and change what we were doing. Bellfield was right into 'whole language' at that stage and we have changed that around. We believe in teacher directed learning and Bellfield has four pillars. I am sure any of the teachers at Bellfield could talk to all of our visitors about the four pillars. The four pillars are our vision and our pedagogy about how children learn. They are absolutely crucial to how we have turned this school around. The first pillar is that we believe in teacher-directed learning, not child-centred learning. The second pillar is that we believe in explicit instruction. Our third pillar is exceptionally important: we believe

in moving kids' knowledge from short term to long-term memory. Our fourth pillar states that none of the top three will take their place effectively unless you have very good relationships with your kids.

With the four pillars there are also 'six givens': excellent relationships between students and teachers, high expectations, excellent presentation skills, provision of feedback, display of student work, and setting the right tone for the school. Having a clearly articulated view concerning core pedagogical approaches is part of the story. John also has a clear understanding about the type of school environment that will promote learning. Students, he says, essentially need three things: they need teachers who care for them, they need friends, and they need to be given work at their level of ability.

At Bellfield, John epitomised the 'instructional leader' concept that came to prominence in the educational literature in the eighties. He had exceptionally high expectations and a very positive, 'can do' attitude. He demonstrated a strong belief that every student could learn and achieve, not only in literacy and numeracy, but also in other areas such as sports, and that they could excel in personal aspects, like demonstrating good behaviour and having high personal expectations. He demonstrated a high level of energy, excellent pedagogical and curriculum knowledge, and a capacity to develop and align staff. At Bellfield he was ever present, regularly visiting classes to work with students and teachers, to help them improve.

This clear learning and social framework – four pillars, six givens, three needs – backed by research evidence, practical experience, and presence, passion and energy, allowed John to create an aligned and energised learning community, one in which students were able to do their best.

Expect the best and love your work

At the end of 2005, with a growing family about to enter secondary schooling, John sought new challenges and an environment for his own children to flourish in. John was successful in gaining the position of Head of Campus at the Berwick campus of Haileybury College.

Haileybury has a long history, firstly as an elite independent boys' school, and in recent years as a co-educational college. Under the principalship of Robert Pargetter, the school had introduced girls to the school, and undergone a dramatic period of growth, with enrolments of more than 2500 across three campuses. The school is not co-educational in a typical way, as from year four onwards, girls and boys are mostly educated in single-sex classes, a concept the school calls 'parallel education'. In terms of student performance in year 12, it is one of the most successful schools in Australia. It also has a strong resource base, through school fees that are amongst the highest in the country. This means that the school can maintain classes, in the last two years of school, that are capped at a maximum of 15 students.

Haileybury is, in many ways, the opposite of Bellfield. John is the head of the K-10 campus (soon to expand to years 11 and 12) of one of the most successful and expensive schools in the state, with architect-designed facilities set on large and magnificent grounds in a growth corridor on the fringe of Melbourne. It is a

resource-rich and privileged environment. The location, the type of school, the resources available, the family backgrounds of students – all of these are the opposite of Bellfield. Yet, the characteristics that made John successful at Bellfield are also evident here. His approach to leading a successful school has translated well to the Haileybury environment, with early evidence from state-wide literacy and numeracy tests indicating that students have improved their learning during the one year that John has been leading the Berwick campus.

The standout feature is his enthusiasm for education and for being a principal. Simply put, John loves his work:

When I go to give principal presentations, I try to put across that I love my job, I love it. It is not all hard work and drudgery, and ‘how am I going to get through it?’ It is actually exhilarating.

The interaction with children and adults, the sense of accomplishment, watching people develop and achieve, these are the things that drive John:

I get an incredible amount of personal satisfaction from supporting teachers to become better teachers, from making a difference in kids’ lives, from developing a culture in the school where everybody is embraced - teachers, parents and kids.

John indicated clearly that the challenge at Haileybury is no different to what it was at Bellfield – to ensure that the students have an environment in which they can achieve their best. John’s mission at Bellfield was to prove that the background of students didn’t matter when it came to learning – all students can achieve at a high level. The concepts that were developed during John’s time at Bellfield – four pillars, six givens and three needs – remain cornerstones for his work at Haileybury. Whilst John’s mission and how he achieves this has not fundamentally altered, at Haileybury he is concerned to ensure that students achieve at a level that is higher than comparable high-fee independent schools: ‘to set standards that other schools haven’t been able to get with their kids, and to get the same sort of reputation that Bellfield had for excellence here.’

In talking to John about his first year at Haileybury, two aspects are emphasised: the use of data for school improvement, and the development of staff. He gets immense satisfaction from being able to demonstrate that students and staff are achieving, and to this end he is very data literate, wanting to collect and use data to show explicitly that students are doing well. In some ways, it is the use of data that distinguishes John from many other passionate educators:

I want to see the data that shows that I am making a difference with kids, I don’t want happy statements, I don’t want to say at the end of my career, ‘Oh I did a good job with kids, I had good rapport with kids’...I want to see that our kids are significantly above state-wide benchmarks and that these are trending up all the time - then you know that you are making a difference in kids’ lives.

John has had former students write to him and thank him for the gift of literacy. Whilst many educators would be happy with this feedback, John needs more, he needs

data to indicate that he is making this type of difference with all the students with whom he works. So, whilst he is data driven, it is so that he can help students, so that he can make a difference to students and know that he and his teachers are making a difference: 'data is not only about where kids are, it is also about what it feeds back to teachers, that they really are making a difference.'

John loves the challenge of helping people to develop, and particularly enjoys working with teachers to improve their practice. John works extensively with teachers and expects all to show commitment to the students and to the school, and to want to improve. He realises that not all the teachers will be extraordinary teachers, but if they are willing to support the school direction and to work to improve their practice, then John will support them '100 per cent'. For John, getting the most out of teachers is about creating a high expectation, data-driven learning environment. As John suggests, it is about creating 'a culture in which teachers are accountable, keeping data that is 'fair dinkum', setting high expectations, going in and watching teachers teach formally...' To lead a school, John believes that teachers want to see that a principal is passionate, determined and understands the work of classroom teachers. Trust is an important element, and in terms of gaining the trust of staff, John talks about the 90/10 principle. Stated simply, to improve school practice, focus on the 90 per cent of things that are good, not the ten percent that need improving. Doing this shows a faith in people and demonstrates an understanding of what they are doing. This gains commitment to then improve the ten per cent of things that need improving; demonstrating rapport, and gaining credibility and respect are important in working with staff to change.

Balance and perspective for sustainable leadership

Many in principal roles find the work exhausting and overwhelming. Not so for John. His clear vision as to what is needed, his great sense of enjoyment, and his ability to maintain balance in his life, are important aspects in how he sustains himself.

John is very clear about what he wants to do and how he will do it, and works hard to ensure the school understands and supports his ambitions. He articulates short and long term goals, and in doing this always sets the highest goals (academic, behavioural, personal, etc). He is an excellent teacher, knows and uses the research literature, is very data literate, has good rapport with students, staff and parents, and is passionate and committed to improving the lives of children. He also acknowledges the complexity of being a principal. As John describes it, in a principal role you will not be able to do everything as well as you would like, so it is best to ensure that, out of the ten things you need to do, the two that are done well are the two that are most important.

John genuinely enjoys being a principal – indeed I wonder if he would be happy doing anything else. Students, staff and parents that I have spoken to about John, have been unanimous in their praise for him, and provide confirmation of his passion, enthusiasm and commitment. The following commentary on John's leadership, by a teacher at Bellfield Primary School, confirms much of what has been reported in this chapter:

John had a reputation as an excellent teacher and this helps in his leadership.
He is the curriculum coordinator of the school – he maintains his interest

and knowledge whilst many principals let this go. He doesn't see his job as a lot of principals do – it is not only about running a school, but also the kids and the curriculum. He talks to every teacher every day, he is in classrooms and speaks about curriculum with passion. His knowledge of curriculum and how education works have been a key to teachers taking on-board change...He runs a school in which teachers are happy to work here, it is not always easy, but they enjoy it. The teachers work long hours and it can be very demanding. A staff where they are universally happy is unusual...Kids are really happy here now, they feel successful here... He is hands-on with every aspect of the school. His style is to be involved with everything. He goes on all excursions, coaches sports teams, etc – no other principal in the area does this. He is accessible. You can talk to him about anything, disagree with him if need be. He believes that all problems should be addressed. Problems that aren't addressed become a negative energy, and he believes that these need to be out in the open, a decision made and then move on. Everyone knows that decisions are made on the basis of the best interest for the kids.

John also talked about keeping a balance in his life, which for John means balancing work and family. For example, he does not come in to school during holiday periods, and he has maintained this, even in his new role at Haileybury. Without this pragmatic realism and approach to life-balance, the work of a principal could overwhelm an individual. For John, the role is exhilarating and a constant source of joy and energy. Put the role in proper perspective and the passion and enthusiasm can be maintained, and if this is maintained, then one's ability to influence the lives of children is enhanced. This is what is central to being a principal, this is what drives John, and this is what helps to create excellent schools. John's infectious passion and energy has clearly helped to create wonderful schools that can demonstrate that they make a difference to the lives of students.

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BELLA IRLICHT

Making a Difference

By Lawrie Drysdale

A powerful vision, strong leadership, and high expectations are the distinguishing characteristics of Bella Irlight, Principal of Port Phillip Specialist School in Melbourne, Victoria. Over two decades, Bella transformed a small special developmental school with limited resources into a world class, 'fully serviced', specialist school with integrated services for students with a range of disabilities. Her underlining motivation and key to success was to accept the challenge of making a difference to the lives of students with disabilities. Her reward? Satisfaction in knowing that she has made a difference. For Bella, being a principal is energising and life giving.

Bella's work in special education has been widely acknowledged. She has received numerous personal awards for her outstanding work, including an Order of Australia and CEO of the Year for Not-For-Profit organisations. While these awards are a symbol of her success, her greatest achievement has been to raise the profile of special education and to witness the success and progress of the students in the school, as well as all those individuals and groups who have contributed to the school's success.



Bella's story as a successful principal started in 1988 when she was appointed principal of South Melbourne Special Developmental School. Although the genesis of her story can be traced to her early teaching and training as a psychologist, the cornerstone of her success is her personal mission to make a difference to the lives of students with disabilities. To appreciate the magnitude of her accomplishments, it is important to understand her vision and trace some of her key achievements.

Bella Irlight AM, Port Phillip Specialist School, Port Melbourne, Victoria.

Vision: Making a difference to the lives of students with disabilities

When Bella took over as principal, the school operated out of a converted, three-roomed house with limited resources. She was responsible for 20 students with multiple disabilities, six staff, and very basic facilities. From the outset Bella made improvements to the programs and facilities, and enrolments grew as the reputation of the school grew. By the early 1990s, the school's population had outgrown the available space and facilities and Bella began the search for new premises.

Bella's vision was to establish an outstanding educational institution for students with disabilities, in order to make a difference to their lives. To do this she embarked on a quest to find a suitable location to construct outstanding facilities, staffed by a range of enthusiastic and skilled professionals, using state-of-the-art equipment, and educationally sound and innovative programs, to maximise the potential of every child. Bella described her vision as a staged plan, and as a number of visions, which together would contribute to the dream of a world-class special school.

Vision 1: New site, new buildings, new beginning

Through foresight, intense lobbying, patience and perseverance, she was able to relocate to a disused primary school in Nott Street, Port Melbourne, which had closed in 1992. Having secured the site, her next challenge was to carry out a major redevelopment and refurbishment with the allocated sum of \$500,000. The problems were many, with soil that was contaminated, a roof that leaked, buildings infested with ants, and a whole second floor that was condemned and unable to be used. To overcome these obstacles, Bella set about building relationships with a range of groups, including business and service organisations. She was able to secure sufficient resources to artistically and innovatively refurbish the ground floor of the two-storey school building and the adjoining buildings. At this stage, she had achieved what was considered a first class facility, with well equipped classrooms, music centre, spa pool and therapy room. The new school was opened by the Premier of Victoria in June 1997.

Vision 2: The pool

Bella's second challenge was to build an indoor, heated hydrotherapy pool. This facility was particularly important for those students with multiple disabilities. Having this facility on site not only saved staff time, but also eliminated the difficulties of travelling to a pool for the students. Again, through networking and establishing relationships with a range of groups and organisations, she gained the necessary sponsorship and support (materials were donated, a parent, who was a builder, arranged for the building) and, with innovative fund raising, built the pool ahead of schedule. The pool was opened by the Victorian Minister for Education in 1999.

Vision 3: Developing a fully serviced school

Integral to Bella's vision was the concept of a 'fully serviced school'. This concept was developed after a study tour to the United States on a Churchill Fellowship in the mid 90s. A fully serviced school aims to provide and coordinate a range of services for both students and the wider community from within the school. It is a place where all of the educational and many of the physical and social needs of students are met. To support

this concept the upper storey was renovated to provide a range of additional services, including a dental clinic, welfare services, a technology centre, an assessment centre specifically designed for intellectually challenged students, and two lecture theatres. In November 2000, the school was upgraded to a 'specialist' school and acknowledged as Australia's first 'fully serviced school' by the Federal Minister for Education, when the minister opened the school in conjunction with the Victorian Deputy Premier and Minister for Health, and the Dean of Education at the University of Melbourne.

Vision 4: Independent living

Bella's fourth vision was to establish an on-site residential accommodation centre, as part of the transition program to help prepare the students for life outside the school. It was also envisaged as a respite option for families. The Thiess Construction Company had a major building project in the area and went to many community groups to offer support for small projects. Thiess approached Bella thinking that they might be able to help build a shed or do some repair work. Bella quickly turned this into an opportunity and asked that they build her a house; her vision for a residential accommodation facility was to become a reality. Over the next year, Thiess and its workers constructed a house on the school grounds for use as an Independent Living Centre; Thiess provided the material and the building unions provided the labour. The house is fully furnished, with three-bedrooms, a living area, kitchen, a bathroom and laundry facilities, and a landscaped garden that will be maintained by the students. This now forms part of a comprehensive transition program. The building was officially opened in 2003 by representatives of Thiess and the Union members who donated their time.

Vision 5: Arts curriculum and the Performing Arts Centre

Bella had always known that the Arts were an important vehicle for helping children to learn, and had witnessed numerous examples where the hidden talents and potential of students with multiple disabilities had been realised through the Arts. In addition, she had for some time been wondering what to do with space under the gymnasium that was used mainly for car parking; it had potential for something special, such as a performing arts complex. She put the two ideas together, firstly by forming an expert team to develop an arts curriculum, and, secondly, by applying to various organisations to support the building of a multi million dollar creative arts centre. In June 2005, the school made a joint announcement that it would be the first specialist school in Australia to focus its entire curriculum on the Arts. A \$2.2 million performing arts/multimedia centre was to be built, funded by the state education department, the Pratt Foundation (a large philanthropic foundation) and the Port Phillip Foundation (a foundation set-up by the school and resourced through major fund-raising activities), with additional community support. In September 2005, the Performing Arts Centre was opened by the Deputy Premier of Victoria and the Victorian Minister for Education Services.

Future visions

These are not Bella's only achievements but give an indication of the breadth and depth of her accomplishments. Port Phillip is a world-class specialist school, demonstrably changing the lives of students. Having achieved so much Bella is not resting: 'The

whole thing just keeps growing... you don't stand still.' Bella does not put timelines on anything because many aspects are beyond her control and new opportunities always arise: 'The key is to be aware of the opportunities, and take them.' For example, the integrated service model has been developed into a sophisticated and intensive case management approach where, each week, individual student issues are presented to a multidisciplinary team, which considers a range of educational, medical, paramedical, social and mental health options. This is personalised learning at the very cutting edge of the concept.

Accounting for Bella's success

The litmus test of Bella's success as a principal has been the string of achievements that have seen Port Phillip transformed into a world-class educational institution. How she has been able to achieve this is inseparable from Bella, the person: who she is, her leadership, behaviour, values and beliefs, vision, energy, and her inexhaustible passion to meet the needs of her students.

Optimism, determination, passion, intuition, resilience, courage, confidence in what is right, and self belief; these are some of Bella's key qualities. For example, she always sees the glass as being half full - problems are a challenge and not a barrier. She has mastered the art of 'getting things done with very little.' Her courage and determination to achieve the best for the school is evidenced by the time she had a confrontation with a very senior politician, who was about to conduct a ceremonial event at the school:

I remember having a stand-up with the politician because I asked him the wrong question. But I will ask anything of anybody if it can help my children – so I said, 'I am sorry if you are offended, but I have to ask the question'...

Again, her persistence and optimism is illustrated in her attitude to any rebuff:

If people say, 'No', I think that I did not ask that question the right way. Maybe I should have asked it another way. You have to rephrase the question or the request. I don't take it as a 'no'. I take it that they did not know what I wanted.

A comprehensive set of skills punctuate her personal qualities. She is an excellent communicator, both orally and in writing. In particular, she is very persuasive and engaging, and is able to deliver a compelling argument, whether it is with an individual or in a group situation.

Bella defines her leadership broadly. She sees herself as juggling several complex roles. However, it is her strategic leadership and capacity building that set her apart. She has been described as an educational entrepreneur, marketer, networker, coalition builder, politician and innovator, all rolled into one. This is illustrated by her ability to build the capacity of the wider community to support the school. By building relationships and forming alliances and networks, she has harnessed a well-oiled machine of voluntary workers, and valuable sponsorship from numerous groups and organisations. Every contact, chance meeting or gathering of people is seen as an opportunity to build a relationship. For example, at business luncheons, she asks

people to give her their business cards. Invitations to come along to the school follow. Staff are expected to be warm and welcoming in how they greet guests. All staff are encouraged to present the school in the best way and extol the virtues of the school at all times. Her open door policy is a genuine attempt to welcome people and highlight both the school's achievements and the ongoing needs. Bella has successfully formed partnerships and alliances with business organisations, associations, service groups, community agencies, government departments, universities, hospitals, corporations, and philanthropic organisations.

Bella says that her focus is on leadership rather than management. She also suggests that it is important to surround yourself with competent people:

It is not the management issues; they can be done with or without you. It is good people...it is not a one person show...I have some fabulous people to work with, and I guess the key is to always surround myself with people who are smarter than me; people who have more credibility...If you're going to be successful in any shape or form, surround yourself with smart, capable people and they'll get you through it.

Bella draws her inspiration from a wide variety of people. She likes to have people who can challenge her and the school:

There've been a lot of people I've drawn on – consultants – I'm not afraid to call in a consultant and say, 'Look, what do you think about the way things are running?' When we had some issues at school, I got an outside consultant in. I said, 'Tell me, warts and all'.

Again, building relationships has been a cornerstone in gaining resources for the school. Bella has proved herself to be influential and skilful in gaining support from many sources. Her approach can be both subtle and compelling. When outlining how she gains corporate support, she says:

Sometimes, we just have breakfast at school with maybe half a dozen people who could be key sponsors. We tell them the story. It's all about knowing 'the story'. Knowing where you're going and what you're doing. And if you can hook people into your vision and your story, they'll often say, 'What is it I can do to help you?'

I never, ever, ask anybody for money (with the exception of submissions for grants). I've never asked for sponsors ... if I have somebody as a guest or to come and visit the school. Never once have I said, 'This is what we need'. I say, 'This is what we're doing, this is our vision for the future and I know that we will get there'. And often they'll say, 'What can I give you? Is there anything I can do? Can I be supportive in any way?' And that works really well; just by taking them through the school and showing them every little step.

Bella can also be described as an educational leader who builds the capacity of individuals and of teams. Staff are exposed to extensive professional development. They are encouraged to keep up-to-date with the latest educational ideas, undertake formal post graduate qualifications and continually develop new skills.

Rather than being a follower of educational trends, Bella sets them. For example, she developed the first fully serviced school in Australia, with a comprehensive integrated service provision, a transition unit to support independent living, and the first Australian school to focus its entire curriculum on the Arts. Her most recent challenge is to gain public recognition of the staff. Bella nominated two staff for a national award in 2006.

Bella's motivators

What motivates and sustains Bella as a principal? Certainly the achievements and milestones contribute to a sense of self efficacy, but Bella is passionate about what she does, and she loves being a principal.

The milestones have their rewards and provide great satisfaction and joy. Bella talks about the small steps that she recalls on the journey: the installation of the first trampoline in the house at Middle Park; the relocation to Nott Street; finding the finance to clear the lead-based paint and contaminated soil and to replace the roof at Nott Street; gaining the support of politicians; building the school swimming pool; achieving recognition as a fully serviced school; completing 'the house' for independent living; and the completion of the performing arts centre.

Yet it is the special moments that impact most. The moments such as finding the hidden talent of a severely autistic student, who can sing like an angel; a child who says his/her first word; a student, who swims across the pool for the first time, when it was never expected that s/he could; the student who was awarded the Young Achiever Award for Arts in the 2006 Variety Club Awards; and the school choir performing at the closing ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games. These are just a sprinkling of the moments that bring with them highs that make it all worthwhile:

Sometimes our measures are very, very small, but very, very significant for the lives of students, parents, families and teachers involved.

There are other kinds of rewards as well: feedback from parents and staff; being available for families, who need support that schools do not normally provide; seeing staff grow and develop; and visits from past students who have succeeded after their experience at Port Phillip.

Bella is more motivated by intrinsic rewards. Feeding off the success of the school and drawing on a great network of people provides strong motivation. She feels she is in a position where she can contribute much to society:

It makes me feel worthwhile if I can do something for someone else. I think that is my biggest motivator.

She says that being a principal has allowed her to try out ideas, think through issues, look at different ways of doing things, and question the moral purpose of the school. She has been at the school for eighteen years and agrees that eighteen years in a school is a long time, but says:

There is no way I would have stayed if the school had not changed, if things were not continually improving and if things did not keep evolving. I have done what I set out to achieve. I have done what I needed to do.

Continuous growth of the school and of herself is what has kept her at the school. She believes the opportunities for personal growth and enrichment are endless: 'my personal growth has been phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal.'

Bella noted the vast array of opportunities for growth and the activities that she has engaged in, such as professional development, local, national and international conferences, participating in working parties, serving on committees and advisory boards, engaging in professional dialogue with colleagues, meeting extraordinary and interesting people, and connecting with a wide diversity of individuals, groups and organisations.

Yet she suggests that taking on the principalship is not for everyone:

You have to like people, time is not your own, you need to be available, and you have to be a risk taker, and not worry about 'the job' and what is going to happen to you, on 'the job'. The job has not been my main issue; it is, 'what can I do?'

She suggests that, if you are not a risk taker and you don't want people with you constantly, then don't take it on. More importantly perhaps, she emphasises the impact of her work on others, rather than seeing it as 'a job'.

Future challenges

Despite all the achievements, Bella sees herself staying at Port Phillip for the foreseeable future:

I stay because this is where my heart and soul is. If I am going to be a principal I want to be here. There are many more challenges – an international conference which involves the community, a new innovative curriculum which we are showcasing, and a lot of blood sweat and tears for the whole staff over the last three years. I want to showcase this and give the people the acknowledgment that they need and deserve.

Other challenges include finding accommodation for increased enrolments, putting into place electronic assessment and reporting for individual students, continuing to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of the new Arts curriculum. But there is one challenge that Bella is putting as a priority - to promote 'teacher leaders' and put into place structures and processes for sustainable leadership in the school.

The challenge is to provide leadership from within and to get people to step up to that next level, to make things sustainable, for them to see the big picture of how the organisation works, who is behind the organisation, and how the wheels turn.

Helping the staff to examine the moral purpose of the school is her latest challenge. She believes that staff need to try out new ideas, think through issues, look for different ways of doing things, question the purpose and reprioritise.

The education of students with disabilities is richer in Melbourne, in Australia and in the world because of the contribution of Bella Irlicht.

MIRIAM-ROSE UNGUNMERR BAUMANN

Education is for Living and for Life

*By Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann
& Julie T. Wells*

St Frances Xavier School, at Nauiyu Nambiyu in the Northern Territory, overlooks the deep green Daly River, and, from the school yard on the river's steep bank, the students can watch crocodiles swimming by. People from different homelands have come together at Nauiyu Nambiyu. The traditional owners of this country are the Malak Malak people, who live both in Nauiyu and downstream at Wooliana. The most commonly spoken language is *Ngan'gikurunggurr*, which means 'sounds of the deep'.

Around 450 people live at Nauiyu – and about 60 children regularly attend school. Although there is a police station and hotel nearby at the Daly River Crossing, Nauiyu is the main service centre for the region with the airstrip, general store, clinic, swimming pool, sports oval, Catholic Church and St Francis Xavier School. The Daly is part of the Daly Katherine River system, that has its watershed in the vast sandstone plateau on the Arnhem Land escarpment. The river system drains north-westward, running deep and green in its upper reaches and then is swept by the fierce tidal waters for eighty kilometres above its shallow mouth. The Daly River region is about 250

kilometres south of Darwin. A narrow bitumen road runs west off the Stuart Highway for about 100 kilometres through rolling hills and then across wide plains before reaching Nauiyu.

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann has been the principal at St Francis Xavier School since 1993. The school is the heart and soul of this community. The playground is shaded by gently spreading trees and in season the lorikeets feed noisily on the ripening mangos. The low lying buildings are beautifully decorated, with paintings of the bountiful local bush tucker,



*Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann AM,
St Frances Xavier School, Nauiyu Nambiyu,
Northern Territory.*

including lotus lilies, native fruits and berries, turtle and barramundi. Under a shady pavilion overlooking the river, women make delicious salad sandwiches and prepare fruit for the children's morning teas and lunch. In the classrooms, the importance of 'both ways' education is evident everywhere; Aboriginal culture and English language learning overlapping in the drawings, painting, stories, spelling, sums and word charts pinned to the walls. There is calm and an earnestness about this little school that emphasises the importance of education in this community.

Miriam-Rose was born in 1950, about ten kilometres upstream from the Daly River Crossing, not that far from Nauiyu, and she takes her 'country' (on the upper reaches of the Moyle River), and her language group – *Ngangiwumirri* – from her father.

I was born under a tree. My mother showed me the place. She showed me where I used to play and where I would hunt for wild honey. The feeling I have for this space is very special. The place where I was born – it's me.
(Farrelly, 2003)

Much time, money, worry and effort has gone into attracting and keeping teachers in Northern Territory schools remote from the main population centres. For Miriam, her staff and students, however, Nauiyu is not remote – it's home, it's country, it's where they and their families belong.

We are river people. We cannot hurry the river. We need to move with the current and understand its ways. (Farrelly, 2003, p.ix)

Miriam's principalship has been shaped by a deep spirituality, that is both Aboriginal and Christian, a legacy of change inflicted by colonisation and by continuity, manifest in the Dreaming stories and the totemic significance imbued in the river and the landscape.

Two worlds colliding yet connecting

No uniform pattern can be read into the nature and outcomes of contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people across the Northern Territory. Geography, timing, personalities and regulatory frameworks have all played a part. In the second half of the twentieth century, spanning Miriam's life, the people of the Daly River region initiated and experienced great changes, which resulted in recognition of prior ownership of their lands and empowerment through taking control of their own community government. It was a long hard battle to win back what was always theirs.

Contact with the non-Aboriginal world came relatively late to the region. Not until the 1860s were the first explorations made of the Daly, from its river mouth in Anson Bay to the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, near Wadeye. A succession of non-Aboriginal settlers harboured grand visions for this country and its beautiful river; dreams that have been revived again as this thirsty continent looks north for new sources of water. By the 1880s, however, a cycle of schemes and failed dreams for agriculture and pastoralism in the region had begun and the Aboriginal people on the Daly were earning a reputation as strong and fierce defenders of their country. The Daly too, strongly resisted settlement – most agricultural and pastoral activity suffered serial set

backs from the river's devastating wet season floods.

Aboriginal people responded differently over time to the new settlers in their country. In the mid 1880s, they suffered a vicious massacre in reprisal for an attack on five copper miners, who were thought to have abused the local women. A small group of Jesuits made three attempts to establish settlements at Uniya, Hermit Hill and New Uniya, all relatively close to where Nauiyu is located, but on the other side of the Daly – but while the local Aboriginal people were interested in the newcomers, the missionaries finally recognised their endeavours would be unsuccessful and abandoned the mission in 1899.

In the following years, the local Aboriginal people developed new skills, working on the farms and stations that were gradually established on their country and trading on their traditional skills of hunting crocodile, shooting buffalo and fishing. The settlers barely subsisted and Aboriginal work was payed for in rations – mostly flour and tobacco. The anthropologist, Stanner, described the farmers in the area in the 1930s as rough, uneducated and dirt poor and, while a considerable degree of mutual dependence had developed between the farmers and the local Aboriginal people, there was little love lost on either side (*Land Claim Book*, p 8.). Few links had developed with the wider Australian community.

With such prolonged contact and no services, the Aboriginal people along the Daly faced major problems – disease, loss of access to their country and an urgent need for education, especially for their children to assist in bridging the ever increasing gulf between traditional life and the skills necessary to live in the twentieth century. In 1954, not long after Miriam was born, the elders approached the Catholic Bishop of Darwin, Bishop O'Loughlin, to ask for a school and health clinic. In the following year, with assistance from the Northern Territory Administration, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart arrived, and, with volunteers, built accommodation, work sheds, a clinic, church, convent school and airstrip, establishing the infrastructure that now supports Nauiyu. In 1956, the Daughters of the Sacred Heart opened St Frances Xavier School, complete with dormitories to ensure as many children as possible could attend.

Now, when the old people are asked whether they are angry about being rounded up by the government and missionaries to live at Nauiyu, they set the record straight: 'No way. We rounded up the government and the missionaries...' Miriam believes the people at Nauiyu, even though they are from so many different language groups, live more harmoniously together than some others in similar circumstances, and sit down together to work out problems, because they were empowered by making the initial request for assistance from the missions and the government.

Through the *Land Rights Act* (NT) and Native Title, some recognition has been granted to the Malak Malak people in the region of their prior ownership of lands and ongoing affiliations. When Nauiyu Community Council was established in 1988, full Aboriginal control was handed to the people.

Educating Miriam

When Miriam was about five, her father, Andy Makat Kurwul, died and following the Aboriginal way, her father's brother Joe Ngurminifirr Attawamba became her father and his wife Nellie (who happened to be Miriam's birth mother's sister), her adopted

mother. Joe Ngurminifirr Attawamba was a highly regarded police tracker at the Daly River Police station. When he was transferred to the Adelaide River police station, about one hundred kilometres away to the east on the Stuart Highway, his family accompanied him and Miriam attended the local public primary school, where all the classes were conducted in English. These were her first steps into the outside world. The police trackers tended to stay with a particular policeman. If the tracker was good at his job, the policeman would want to keep him on his team, and so the family spent time at Mataranka and Pine Creek as well, where Miriam continued her primary school education – all conducted in English – at public schools.

Sadly, Nellie passed away while they were back at Adelaide River, and again, following ‘Aboriginal way’, Miriam was not able to stay with her adopted father and she returned to her birth mother at Daly River. Miriam was about eleven years old and this was a sad time and a difficult move, but she understood this was law and that the adults had decided what was best for her. At Daly River, Miriam joined the boarders at St Francis Xavier School and completed her primary education. This was where she had her first sustained encounter with Catholicism. The teachings of the Sisters of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart impressed Miriam and she chose to be baptised when she was about fourteen years old, and took her First Holy Communion a few days later. This was a landmark event in Miriam’s life story.

For children in the Northern Territory in the early 1960s, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, the only chance for a secondary education was to go interstate to a southern boarding school and this was not available for Miriam. Instead, she stayed on at the convent after completing her primary education. The nuns kept places for older girls who didn’t necessarily want to go back to their families.

Many Aboriginal people in the region had lived and worked on pastoral stations, but when the new regulations governing equal wages were passed in 1966, station work dried up and people drifted home, leading to pressure on accommodation. The girls at the convent were employed as domestics and helped keep the boarding school running. Miriam remembers those days fondly even though it was hard work:

I believe it was the best thing that could happen – we learnt what work was, but there was still time to go hunting, go on picnics etc. There were sad and difficult parts of that time too – the nuns were taking the place of our parents – they had to impose discipline....

As the women of the Daly say:

We have experienced the good and bad of European settlement. We are children of the Mission... (Farrelly, 2003, p.1)

When she was about 18, Miriam was offered a job as home help for a teacher, Ethel Nelson, at St Francis Xavier School. She jumped at the chance. Not long after she had started in the position, Ethel came home to find Miriam was reading a book. Miriam recalls:

Ethel said: ‘Can you read?’

‘Yes’, I replied.

‘So read me a page’, she said. I did.

The teacher said, 'Right, you are going to be my assistant teacher'.

This was the opportunity she had been looking for. The pay was better and the teacher immediately began looking for training opportunities for Miriam, whose lively intelligence, wit and leadership qualities were clearly shining through.

Miriam relished the new experiences, and in the following years, she completed a teaching assistants course at Kormilda College in Darwin in 1968; became a teacher's aide at St Francis Xavier School; and in 1971 undertook further training at Kormilda College and spent one year on secondment to the Commonwealth in Victoria, where she worked with art teachers in schools throughout the state. In 1974, she became a fully qualified teacher with the Commonwealth Teaching Service, and in the following year was appointed art consultant with the Northern Territory Department of Education in Darwin. She then taught at St John's College, also in Darwin, before returning to Daly River in 1981.

Doors were opening for Miriam-Rose.

Ungunmerr the artist

Through the teacher training programs, Miriam realised her gift as a story teller and artist. During the 1970s, she refined her unique painting style in which she reconciled her belief in both Catholic and Aboriginal spirituality (Kleinart & Neale, 2000, p.644). Education and art developed as the two key foci in Miriam's life. Her first major work was painting the fourteen Stations of the Cross in the Daly River church in 1971, still there today, after which she was commissioned to illustrate Alan Marshall's book, *People of the Dreaming*. There were opportunities to travel and Miriam visited Papua New Guinea and Bali as an artist. She also visited Casey Station in the Antarctic.

In the 1980s Miriam continued to break new ground as both an educator and artist. She set up the Uniting Church Women's Resource Centre in Darwin, married Ken Baumann and later had a son called Kurt. In 1988 she successfully completed her Bachelor of Arts in Education at Deakin University, through Batchelor College. The importance of painting as a medium for expression was always close to her heart, and, with the assistance of some of the Daly River senior women, she set up the Magellan House Women's Centre there in 1986. The Centre was an immediate success and the program on offer rapidly expanded. In 1987, the centre appointed an art coordinator and, in the same year, held its first exhibition at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

The name Merrepen Arts was adopted from this exhibition and is now associated with the very decorative, figurative acrylic paintings from Nauiyu. Miriam signs her artworks 'Ungunmerr', and her stylistic influence is obvious in the way Christian and Indigenous images are used, in a mix of Dreaming stories and bush tucker scenes with Christian stories and symbols (Kleinart & Neale, 2000, p.644). Over the years, Miriam has taught many of the younger artists at Nauiyu and is proud of the older women, including her mother, who found painting and became recognised artists with a source of income.

These days Merrepen Arts is housed in a fine, contemporary, tropical building with a gallery upstairs, and a large, cool area downstairs, where the artists work in a number

of different media. Nauiyu hosts the annual Merrepen Arts and Cultural Festival, a major event in the Northern Territory's art calendar.

Education is for living and for life

While establishing a career as an artist, a leader and an educator, Miriam's commitment to education was overwhelming and, in 1990, she accepted the appointment as Principal-in-Training at St Francis Xavier School. Miriam acknowledges the excellent mentoring she received that helped her come to terms with the complexities of school management and administration. In 1993, the same year she was awarded her Bachelor of Education degree, Miriam was confirmed as principal.

In the following year, Miriam outlined her vision for the school and for Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory:

...when educating Aboriginal children... they have to be trained to face a wider community. To do this and to take their place in that community they have to change some of their ways...They will have to take up new challenges and adapt but not lose their Aboriginality. If they are educated only one way – in Aboriginal skills or in non-Aboriginal skills, they may feel lost in the wider community or even in their own. They have to live in today's world, find their identity in this world, and adapt to life at this point in time. (Baumann, 1994)

Miriam's vision reflected her own experience and the model for educating Aboriginal children that had developed as Aboriginal communities moved towards controlling their children's education from the late 1970s onwards. Bi-cultural, or 'two-way', schooling recognised that teaching Aboriginal language and culture was an end in itself, and that cultural maintenance and academic success in the western sense would need to go hand in hand. Fine in theory, but how would it work in practice?

For two-way schooling to be successful, however, children must become fluent in English and succeed academically. What better role model might the children look to than their principal? Students must recognise that academic success means long hours of study and a preparedness to leave the community to continue their education. Miriam is not blind to the problems in Aboriginal communities in the Territory, and knows only too well that the more difficulties Aboriginal people face in their daily lives the more they will seek refuge in mind numbing solutions, like 'grog', 'gunja', or denial of personal aims and objectives.

In 2000, in her submission to the Commonwealth Grants Commission Indigenous Funding Inquiry, Miriam was emphatic – poor literacy is the greatest barrier to employment. Resolve the education issues and everything else will follow she argued – employment, good health, self-respect and a reasonable standard of living. Too many communities are currently on a road to nowhere.

Without a realistic degree of literacy, any opportunity is really just window dressing to any possible aspirant. Education is the key to the future... the cornerstone of opportunity – without it what do the young have?

Miriam outlined an Indigenous pedagogy, based on watching, listening, imitating and recognising the importance of story telling in an oral tradition.

When I was young the whole bush was our school. We learned how to look out on the world, the country and the bush, and we listened to the wonderful stories that told how everything came into being – the hills, the waterholes, the rivers, the places of importance and the stories that went with them. The bush was our book and we read its signs – tracks of animals, signs that someone had passed that way. (Baumann, 1994)

Motivation is inherent in learning to survive in the bush and in wanting to be accepted. Miriam reflects this in her own experience:

Looking back now, I realise how much influence my family and my people have had on my early education; that is my cultural education. It was a practical education. I learned by doing and I wanted to, because I could see how important it was for my elders and for me. We were in the education process together. Education was naturally motivated. Education was part of life. Education was for living. (Bin-Salik, 2000, p.167)

Miriam elaborated her ideas about Indigenous pedagogy in *The Nature of the Aboriginal Children* (Baumann, 1976), so that non-Aboriginal teachers could begin to understand that, in their classrooms, were intelligent Aboriginal children capable of succeeding academically ‘the whitefella way’, given the right opportunities.

Miriam believes education should be life-enhancing, helping individuals meet challenges, make decisions and become more ‘fully alive’ (Baumann, 1994). St Francis Xavier School recognises the importance of assisting the development of children’s spiritual life, often through art.

I encourage them [the students] to express themselves, especially in their art; to express their inspirations, their perceptions, their joys, their ambitions, even their frustrations, in colour and symbols.

Symbols, true symbols are wonderful things. They draw on things deep down within you, expressing, at times, the almost inexpressible. They lend themselves to further and still further meaning. Aboriginal people are people of deep feeling, and symbols are their deepest and favourite mode of expression. (Baumann, 1994)

Learning is ‘community business’

For Miriam, two-way schooling could only work when learning was integrated into the community and the community was actively engaged with the school. Early in her career as principal, Miriam-Rose rearranged the way in which the children were organised into classes. Children were placed in language/family groups rather than the traditional age/attainment groupings.

The children are eager to help their own relations and so the younger ones learn more quickly from their older brothers and sisters. (Baumann, 1994)

Remember, the Nauiyu community is made up of people from several different language groups, which has great potential to cause conflict. Miriam invited the community back into the school and the arrangement of the children into family groups freed up many aspects of cultural transmission.

The students receive the practical, cultural and spiritual elements in their education that build lifelong bonds across generations. Through excursions into the homelands, parents and elders teach the children the knowledge they needed as traditional owners of their country – learning the stories, locating the dreaming places, how the land was formed, how the people who belong in that country came to be there.

In the mid 1990s, I visited St Francis Xavier School with a group of student teachers. At recess, Miriam took us into the playground and sitting in groups under the shady trees were the community elders and young mothers, talking with the students and watching them play. It was a heart-warming sight. Miriam beamed, explaining to us that one of her proudest achievements was that the old people now visited the school and felt part of it. In the old days, she said, when the school was the mission school, the old people walked around the school, keeping their distance.

Miriam considers Aboriginal women are well equipped to take on the challenges of living within two cultures. When Aboriginal women join the education system, they bring their traditional role as managers of day to day life. Miriam has led the way in ensuring Aboriginal women are trained as teachers and now St Francis Xavier School can draw on a pool of qualified Aboriginal women in the community, who can exercise their traditional authority as well as meeting the responsibilities of classroom management in the Northern Territory's Catholic education system.

Leadership and traditional authority

When Miriam first started work as an assistant teacher and then teacher, in her community, she faced very particular challenges in terms of her classroom management. Most of the community had little or no experience of a school system and what exposure the community had was squarely in the non-Aboriginal domain – it belonged to the missionaries. Many Aboriginal people were educators, in that they had authority to teach about their own culture, but a school system is very different. In addition, Miriam had to impose her authority in the school setting across traditional family and kin boundaries and obligations – no easy task and one that has bedevilled so many Indigenous-run enterprises in communities underpinned by hierarchies of obligation, and deferral in decision making.

When Miriam started out as an assistant teacher at St Francis Xavier, if she corrected or disciplined students in her class, they were just as likely to run home, threatening to get their brothers or mum and dad to come to the school to attack her with a spear or nulla nulla.

....and they did and the family would come to try and fight with me because I corrected or punished a student, or stopped them from hitting someone else. I would then talk to the people to say – look if kids play up in school, you have to leave that at the school; because if its goes outside, that thing becomes really big.

Once she qualified as a teacher, Miriam had to make it clear to the community that she would be managing her own classroom, writing her own programs and in every way would be equal with all other qualified teachers. There was no precedent she could call on – she was the first fully qualified Aboriginal teacher in the Northern Territory. As Miriam advanced through the education system, finally to take on the role of principal, she had to take her community with her.

Now, twenty years later, people accept a different way and are saying – if kids play up at school, you deal with it; and if it's a serious matter, we come to the school and talk about it. They don't say, 'Now we are going to fight you down at the camp'.

When the people of the Daly River Mission moved to become the self-governing community of Nauiyu, Miriam took a leadership role in this forum as well – one in which political savvy and strategic thinking were necessary, and which again was outside the usual domain of Aboriginal women's traditional role in governance.

The determination with which Miriam has taken on the challenges of leading her school and her community have been recognised in a number of ways. Miriam was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 1998 for 'service to the community of Nauiyu Nambiyu in the Northern Territory, particularly through the promotion of aboriginal education and aboriginal art'; and in 2002 she was awarded the Doctor of Letters, *Honoris Causa*, from the Northern Territory University, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to Aboriginal education in the Territory. Miriam completed her Master of Education with High Distinction in 1999.

Most recently, Miriam has been called on to show leadership in the national arena and she sits on the National Indigenous Council, an appointed body that is the principal source of advice to the Prime Minister and the Australian Government on Indigenous matters.

Dadirri: The deep spring within

From where does Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann – leader, politician, artist and educator – garner her strength and continue to achieve and find solace when times are tough? Miriam sometimes wonders if people realise the hurt and struggle she has endured along the way and just how tough it is for Aboriginal people to succeed and how few role models they have. Miriam's strength comes from prayer and from her culture – about this she is unequivocal.

In the preface to the book *Dadirri – The Spring Within: The Spiritual Art of the Aboriginal People from Australia's Daly River Regions* (Farrelly, 2003), Miriam elaborates the way her spirituality is seamlessly Aboriginal and Christian. She uses the term *dadirri*, to describe the quality of still awareness that brings peace.

Dadirri recognises the deep spring inside us all. We call on it and it calls on us... It is something like what you call contemplation... When I experience dadirri I am made whole again. (Farrelly, 2003)

The contemplative way of *dadirri* encompasses all aspects of daily life. It's about waiting for the right time – the right time for ceremonies, for fruit to ripen and seeds

to dry. Nothing should be hurried.

We don't mind waiting because we want things to be done with care... We don't like to hurry. There is nothing more urgent than what we are attending to ... We wait on God too. His time is the right time. We wait for Him to make His word clear to us. We don't worry. We know that, in time and in the spirit of dadirri (that deep listening and quiet stillness), His way will be clear. (Farrelly, 2003)

Miriam's legacy

Miriam's principalship has been shaped by her community and for her that is deeply satisfying. She does not disaggregate her principalship into domains – private and public, secular and religious, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Her principalship is based on educating the whole child in the community and educating the community as a spiritual and cultural leader.

Here I can be a principal in a way that makes me feel good. Because I am related to most of the people here I am able to share knowledge with the children, the students, the family and the community – I couldn't do that in Darwin. I would have to be a very different kind of principal.

There is now a pool of Aboriginal teachers at Nauiyu, and, just as importantly, teacher training has provided opportunities for women to experience life away from the Daly, just as Miriam did, re-enforcing Miriam's edict that education is the key to the world. The children who have attended St Francis Xavier School know their Aboriginal culture. Miriam wants to see her students identify as Aboriginal people in a way that makes them feel comfortable and strong about who they are, so they can go out into the world with confidence and find out what the world has to offer them.

There is always more to be done. Miriam is working with Charles Darwin University on a range of programs for young people in the community between 13 and 25 years of age, who have not gone on to secondary education, but who are ready to pick up where they left off. Options to engage in the tourist industry are being looked at more closely and many of the young community members will be ideally placed to share their knowledge about the beautiful and bountiful country in the Daly River region.

Miriam talks about wanting to paint again when she has time, but it's hard to imagine she will be able to turn her back on the challenges and satisfactions of leading and educating her community.

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TONY CONSIDINE

A Fair Go for All

By Ken Thompson

Tony was the principal at the remote Thursday Island High School in the Torres Strait for six years, ending with his appointment in 2006 as the principal at Taminmin High School, Humpty Doo, in the Northern Territory. Tony cares deeply about the learning of all young people, and his time at Thursday Island High School was particularly important, because he was determined to prove that the mostly indigenous students in this isolated community could achieve a high level of learning, and that they could do this in their own community, rather than having to travel to a southern city to attend boarding school. He led his community to demonstrate to themselves as well as others, that ‘a fair go’ was possible.

Early in his life Tony knew that he wanted to work with young people. He completed year 12 in Townsville in 1979. Most of his family worked within the motor industry. Against this trend, he wanted to do something with people – tourism, national parks or working with young people were foremost among his thoughts. He became a teacher and taught in several schools in the north of Queensland over a decade, including two years as a deputy principal, before deciding that he wanted to become a principal.

Three places were on a ‘wish list’, and he hoped that one of them might become available over the next three years. Three weeks later, the position at one of the schools, Thursday Island High School, was advertised.



Thursday Island High School: A new vision

Thursday Island is part of the Torres Strait between Australia and Papua New Guinea. Fifteen of the 100 islands are inhabited, with a

Tony Considine, Thursday Island High School in the Torres Straits (1999-2005), Taminmin High School, Humpty Doo, in the Northern Territory (2006-).

total population of 8,000. In many ways it is an idyllic setting in which to live. Yet, the remoteness, the small and dispersed population, and low per capita income mean that the community experiences considerable disadvantage, as shown in low levels of literacy and numeracy and post-secondary school qualifications, and high levels of unemployment, welfare dependency, illness and mortality. Thursday Island High School is a school that is clearly in challenging circumstances.

When he first arrived at the high school, Tony quickly saw the need to improve literacy skills and he realised that whatever action was to be taken needed broad community support. An elaborate envisioning process was embarked upon, involving all in the wider school community and this resulted in a vision 'to provide students with culturally appropriate education that embodies the knowledge, skills and literacy platform to fulfil their potential as global citizens.'

Having identified the vision, the community looked at the barriers which might hinder its achievement. The barriers included: low levels of English literacy (whilst many students were very able linguistically, speaking several languages, they needed to be better at English, the language of the economy); a belief that it was necessary to leave the islands to receive a good education; low expectations that teachers held for the students; poor student discipline; and courses that were perceived by students to be unexciting and not relevant to their needs.

Strategies to overcome the barriers were many, with student safety and well-being, student work ethic, and curriculum relevance three important foci. The school needed to be a more physically and emotionally safe place, and so behavioural expectations were made clear through a behaviour management policy that was negotiated with, and supported by, the school community. As Tony describes it:

...there was absolutely no negotiation with respect to matters such as smoking, drugs and swearing at staff.

To improve the work ethic of students, a new assessment plan stipulated that students submitted all the required work. Only those who met this requirement were allowed to attend graduation, the biggest event on the island. Another vital step to overcoming the barriers was to make the senior curriculum more relevant and exciting for students, whilst still providing a rigorous program. An example of this was the introduction of marine studies, which offered the opportunity to do qualifications up to coxswain level.

Making a difference: Young people can succeed

Tony led an astonishing turnaround in student and family attitudes to school and in student learning outcomes. For Tony, his key accomplishment was:

...taking a school [that was] little known, to one that is the best known in indigenous education in the country for achieving excellence and instilling 'the absolute' belief in the kids that they can succeed.

The community and staff were swept along with, and supported, Tony's passion to make a difference: 'everyone now knows that the young people can succeed.'

There are many other indicators of the success of Tony's time at Thursday Island.

The school won the *Weekend Australian* newspaper award for Australian School of the Year for 2003. One of the judges, Jenny Buckingham, gave a succinct view of the school's success: 'The staff and families of this school have provided an environment where students defy stereotype and can aspire to, and achieve, great things.' (www.daretolead.edu.au/cache14/STORY_THURISLAND.html, accessed February 20, 2007). The award was won for astonishing levels of improvement in key outcome areas. For example, enrolment grew from 298 to 358 students from 1999 to 2003. The Year 8 to Year 12 retention rates doubled from 40 per cent in 1999 to 80 percent in 2002. In 2000, only 3 out of 43 Year 12 students met the tertiary entrance requirements, by 2003 it was 14 out of 46.

Engaging the community

Tony was not only concerned with helping students during the time he was principal, he also helped construct a sustainable school improvement program by developing important networks for the school:

Thursday Island afforded me opportunities in developing networks of political importance ... for the community.

During Tony's time at Thursday Island, the school had visits from the Governor General, the Queensland Governor, the Queensland Education Minister and other key politicians. Important networks were also developed through organisations such as Indigenous Festivals Australia.

These networks were not only important for the community and the school, but also helped Tony to be a successful principal:

One important frame of the principalship is the development of networks beyond the school. It is the only way to build the wider knowledge you need for the role. These networks led to tangible support in terms of finances, services and people's time.

Winning the confidence of people was very important to Tony for the development of the school. People on the islands had believed that you got a better secondary education elsewhere, by going 'south'. The judgements of parents about the school seemed to be tied to their own experience of the school when they had attended as students. Many of these views were outdated myths, and simply wrong, and so it was important for the development of the school to address these perceptions.

One strategy was to open the school to the community and show what it was like. To do this, many community groups were encouraged to use the school facilities, such as the Marine Rescue Group. Elections were held at the school. The school became a venue for holiday club activities for young people and their parents. A church began to use the school buildings for services and various other groups used the library for meetings. The school was taken out to the community and was increasingly becoming an important part of the community.

Increased use of the buildings by significant community groups led to increased commitment by the community to the school and its development. For example, the school site was uninteresting and barren, and needed considerable landscaping.

Modelled on a television program, a community involvement project (Ground Force) was developed whereby people were encouraged to come to the school and work on a project for a day. Soon 50 to 60 people were regularly offering their time and expertise. The opportunities for teachers and community members to talk and work together built many new relationships, and developed a sense of joint pride and ownership of the school: 'as the school looked better, more people wanted to use it.'

'We can fly'

Changing community perspectives of the school was part of the school transformation, but of vital importance was changing the students' perspective of the school and developing the belief that they could 'fly' at their local school. There was a strong view that many students were not achieving as well as they could, and that their potential was not being fulfilled. There seemed to be a strong 'tall poppy' syndrome amongst the indigenous community that meant students were reluctant to do their best.

Named after the school's motto, 'Strive to Excel', the 'Excel Program' was developed to counter this belief. The academic ability of students was tested and those with very high academic potential formed the 'Excel Group'. Their curriculum focused on higher order thinking skills, and they were accelerated through the curriculum. The formation of this group 'built a critical mass of kids striving for excellence, which encouraged other kids to strive for this as well.' The tall poppy syndrome was gone, it was now not only possible, but desirable, to achieve academically. This approach has had tangible benefits. One group of students from the program have gone off together to study at university where they share a house and are supporting each other.

Another great story from this program is that of the 2006 Year 12 Dux, Sarah Kesby, who is now studying to be a doctor at James Cook University in Townsville. Sarah achieved very high results for her Year 12 and plans to return to the islands one day as a specialist in obstetrics. Tony is hopeful that the success of these young people will inspire others by providing a very tangible example of what students at the school can achieve.

I had the opportunity to talk to Sarah by telephone about her success. I asked her about the student views of Tony's leadership. Sarah started at the school in 2003, when Tony was already the principal, and she told me that:

Mr Considine was awesome. He was very open with students, he cared a lot about the students and it showed and he was respected for that. He would talk to students. He would sort out problems and he managed things really well.

Sarah was in the top ability group, the red group, the 'Excel Group': 'All the kids in that group wanted to work to get great improvement', said Sarah.

Sarah went to a boarding school to 'the south' for a while in year 10, but returned to Thursday Island High for the second half of year 11 and all of year 12. In her view the Thursday Island teachers were teaching at a higher standard than that required by the Board of Education. She also spoke of the incentives Tony put in place to encourage students to do well:

There were rewards for kids who did do well. There were behaviour levels and there was a certificate so students were competing to see who could reach the top level first.

From Sarah's point of view, it was clear to students that the community respected Tony's work. One indicator of this to students was that they saw lots of guest speakers at assemblies, with people such as Bishop Mabo and other community leaders attending graduation ceremonies. Students appreciated the development of the grounds from the Ground Force Program. 'The grounds were lovely' Sarah said. She felt proud of the school and respected the school and said that 'people were disappointed that he was leaving, they were sad and shocked.'

Again she described him as 'awesome'. In the view of students Tony worked very hard, he was very confident and made good decisions and was regarded as very popular.

The exhilaration of leading change and making a difference

For Tony, being a principal puts him in a position to make a difference on a wider scale. He gets a great deal of satisfaction from knowing that he is making a difference to students and the community, and influencing education more broadly.

He expresses a clear preference for '...working in a place where managing and driving change for improvement' is needed. He enjoys being part of a dynamic, changing school environment; 'I don't think I'd like to be in a school where all systems are rigid.' He enjoyed the challenges and achievements of the visioning process, and aligning values with school direction. For Tony, having a clear vision helps him to make a difference.

Whilst leading changes is exciting, it also provides many of the challenges of the principal's role. For Tony the challenges included:

- Dealing with the politics of change, both local and external;
- Understanding a political framework that is culturally different to your own;
- The need to develop networks throughout the community;
- The need to carefully position the school to benefit from both the current and changing political landscape;
- Knowing when you have enough support to move forward; and
- Sustaining the change process.

Sustaining change is important for Tony. You have to 'maintain the courage' throughout a change process. He believes that many principals run out of that courage. He again highlights the importance of grounding change processes in clearly defined and well accepted values; 'Grounding (the change process) in values sustains you and makes you resilient.'

In Tony's view, the privilege of the principalship comes from the fact that:

...unlike any other area in the public service, you are the CEO of your complex. You have scope, authority and capacity to make change more than most areas of the public service. You are all things to all people. You can do things that need to be done. To a large degree you are autonomous.

At Thursday Island, the school is classified such that it receives the highest level of financial and strategic devolution and Tony seemed to revel in this level of autonomy.

Tony finds being principal exhilarating, and the exhilaration is always about the achievement of young people, always about making a difference in their lives.

The principalship is exhilarating when you go into a place that is very staid, and then you build a curriculum, one that really challenges and engages them (students). An example of this is the marine science course, utilising the marine science resources of the community and beyond.

In his fourth and fifth year at the school, Tony and his colleagues were seeing students move into university in marine science, but also saw opportunities for them to go into scientific careers, an area where indigenous young people are underrepresented. Consequently, a project was started for students to work with Earth Watch and National Parks Queensland, focusing on the study of turtles. The logistics involved transporting students, two at a time, 60 nautical miles (110 kilometres) to the site of the project. Working with scientists for a week, the students were involved in the counting and researching of turtles. Sometimes they would work all night counting turtle eggs, watching them hatch and counting how many hatchlings made it to the water. Tony stated that:

...the kids' attitude to science changed. They saw they could do something and make a difference.

In relation to the marine program, Tony explained:

Most families have a dinghy [he called them the Commodore of the Islands]. Through the marine course, we could teach students how to handle electronic equipment and larger vessels. The program also involved SCUBA courses, an interest that everyone has on the islands.

The price

Those who have spent some time in leadership positions, especially school leadership positions, have experienced the darker side of the role. Tony described the times when the role was not always positive for him. For example, when there was strife in the community, supporting staff to adjust to living in remote areas, or resolving difficult community issues. Of most concern was when the school had made headway with young people, where they looked like they would do well, and then they moved on, and 'you hear later that they haven't made it.' Progress made can sometimes be fragile without continuing support.

There are two great costs of the principalship in Tony's view. The first is the time the job takes. He tries to restrict the day on site to ten hours, but that excludes evening meetings. Last year he managed three weeks away from work.

The second cost is the loneliness of the job, making collegiality outside the school vital. He enjoyed the opportunity of spending time with colleagues from other schools who have visited Thursday Island; 'It was satisfying to help others and enter into

robust dialogue with other principals on improvement processes.’ On Thursday Island, Tony especially valued the relationships he had with other senior public servants and community leaders.

Moving on to new challenges

It is often hard to pick the right time to move on for a principal. There are no rules, just circumstances for the individual and the particular school. The variables to consider are numerous and interrelate in complex ways. Personal and family circumstances often play a strong role.

After six very successful years on Thursday Island, Tony decided that he would make the move to Taminmin High School to seek new challenges. He believes that, when working in remote areas, it is important to review your career and not stay too long in the school, for your own good and that of the community in terms of having a principal with energy and ideas. At Taminmin High School, he enjoys the opportunity to again improve school performance and to tackle new things. The agricultural facilities also attract Tony because he likes rural schools and rural people.

Tony came to Taminmin and made an assessment, with the school council, about what needed to be done. A key issue for development was pride in the school. After talking with the Council, he announced at his first assembly that school uniform would become mandatory via a new dress code; by the start of 2007, the school was operating as a full uniform school with excellent compliance. At that first assembly he also explained a ‘no tolerance’ policy in relation to smoking, illicit drugs, swearing at teachers, and mobile phone and walkman use during the school day - an approach to safety and proper behaviour that was so successful at his previous school.

There will be significant developments in middle schooling at Taminmin High School. A \$4.6 million building program will see a new senior block built, extensive renovations to the existing blocks, and sub-schools established with geographical and time schedule differences to fully utilise facilities. Whilst initial projections estimated that the school would eventually grow to 700 students, at the beginning of 2007 there were already 719 students with no capacity for the school to take further enrolments.

When the school found out that the middle schooling resources would be available, Tony led the community through a mind mapping exercise to work through all the implications, possibilities and decisions that could be made. The thoughtful and focused reformer was again leading a school community through a major change.

Thoughts about his future

Tony is clearly committed to the development of his new school for the next few years. But when he is asked about his future career beyond that, he believes that he will be at a crossroad. He is not sure, at this stage, if he wants to go into ‘the bureaucracy’, as he is anxious about losing the capacity to contribute to positive change in individuals. He senses that he would like to do consultancy work in other schools and so extend his ideas and positive influence. Had he stayed in Queensland, he would have done just that. Tony was named in a team of ten in the ‘Partners for Success High Achiever Principals’ Network’. This would have seen him sharing his experience with principal

colleagues, a role he now seems ready for.

The final word: It is all about the students – about making a difference.

When asked what he enjoys most about the job, Tony speaks with conviction, clarity and immediacy, saying, ‘Turning out young people who are going to be more successful than they otherwise would have been.’ He speaks enthusiastically of seeing young people ‘making it’ and of the role a principal can play in directly supporting the young people, or creating systems in which each young person can flourish. Tony is clear about the satisfaction he gets from his principalship and the bottom line for him is the achievement of his students. He stated that, ‘secondary school makes an enormous difference to the lives of people if you get it right.’

Tony got it right at Thursday Island High School and looks set to do it again at Taminmin High School. For Tony, being a principal is all about the students, about making a difference, but it is especially about ensuring that there is a ‘fair go for all’.

Hope for a Better Future

By Patrick Duignan & David Gurr

Whilst the stories in this book stand alone as testament to the wonderful work of these successful principals, it is important also to make sense of the stories. To help, the material in this chapter provides a composite picture through the identification of key themes and motivators. While these tend to apply overall to each one of the principals, the editors decided not to identify individual principals with any particular theme or motivator.

Key themes from the principals' stories in this book

A clearly articulated philosophy and deep moral purpose

All the principals in this book have well-developed philosophies and clear values as educators and as educational leaders. Their philosophies have been shaped by their life and work experiences, by key people in their formative years, and by their professional learning experiences. From their philosophy and values, they have generated a deep sense of moral purpose which is the driving force for their work as principal and as leader of their school community. Fundamentally, this is about helping students to develop and to have a better future; they want to make a difference.

An unwavering focus on all students and their learning needs

All of the principals are devoted to the students in their school and focus their leadership efforts on maximising opportunities and outcomes for all students. They are 'contextual educational leaders' in the sense that they know the needs of their students and they respond in customised ways to these needs. They are leaders of learning and they see it as a priority and prime responsibility of their principalship to marshal the resources of the school to support and sustain high quality teaching and learning.

A passionate belief in the significance of what they do

Passion is a word that is used often in their stories. They are passionate people and they are especially passionate about what they do as professional educators and as leaders of their school communities. They are passionate about students as young people and as learners, and they devote great effort in preparing them for the challenges of life

outside the relative safety of their school. Their passion is often contagious for staff and students; they inspire others to be passionate about their teaching, learning and life.

A commitment to making a difference

One gets a sense of destiny from some of the principals' stories in this book. They have a deep desire to have an impact and make a difference in the lives of all those they touch in their school communities, especially their students. In many of the stories, there is a missionary zeal to change the lives of students for the better, to prepare the students to meet the difficult challenges outside the school and in the future, and to not only survive, but thrive and make significant contributions to communities and the common good.

A focus on and valuing of people

The principals seem to have a keen awareness and a sensitive appreciation of the centrality of relationships in leading, teaching and learning. While they are well aware of the need for proper structures and processes for the leadership and management of their schools, they all seem to be acutely aware that extraordinary outcomes are achieved by, and through, people. Their schools and school communities place a premium on valuing people, engaging with them, and recognising and rewarding their contributions. All in the school community are encouraged and supported within school cultures that put people before structures and processes.

Strong support for learning, growth and development

The principals are all committed to learning and improvement for themselves and for all who participate in the learning enterprise in their school communities. Some of the principals have learned through their experiences that they need to be good listeners and keep an open mind.

The principals tend to be thoughtful and reflective, constantly examining and critiquing the way things are, and wanting to improve upon this. This examination and critique usually starts with reflection on their own philosophies and practices. They develop habits of reflection and constructive critique with the purpose of bringing about change and improvement in the conditions for learning for all students.

They acknowledge that, at times, their principalship can be very challenging, even a struggle, but they all seem to regard these challenges as opportunities for learning and growth. They tend to regard their schools as learning communities where all members (not just students) are continuously learning to improve their practices and bring about positive change.

An expectation for high professional standards

Only the best is good enough for the principals in this book. Professionals, by definition, set high standards for themselves and those who work with them, and these principals are no exception. Achieving these high standards demands: professional commitment; a passion for excellence; high energy and effort; long-term consistency regarding what really matters; capacity to build professional collegial learning cultures; and the judicious use of valuable resources.

All the principals have been successful in meeting these demands and are actively involved in promoting and supporting policies and practices that make their schools highly credible and admired as places of scholarship and learning, where students are challenged and engaged to realise their potential as learners and as human beings. An important hallmark of a professional educator is demonstrating the capacity to create the pedagogical and curriculum conditions, opportunities and processes to ensure that all the students in their school have fair and just access and opportunities to experience stimulating and engaging learning environments. This usually means accepting where students currently are in their learning, and then customising curriculum programs and teaching and learning processes to maximise learning for each student. This is often a daunting challenge, but many of these principals simply refuse to accept that failure is an option, and they are unwilling to compromise when the needs, interests and educational well-being of students are at stake.

A collaborative, collegial and inclusive school culture

They create school cultures where staff and students are challenged to strive to reach their full potential as human beings, within supportive and collegial relationships. Staff, students, parents, even community stakeholders, are all made to feel that they are part of the education enterprise, and that they matter, thereby giving everyone a sense of ownership and belonging. In this way commitment is enhanced and a sense of community created.

Most of the principals see their schools and school communities as part of larger ‘connected communities’, and they go to great lengths to engage with significant community stakeholders outside of their schools. Increasingly, they use technology to support these initiatives.

Leadership is seen as service

The principals are all humble and modest about their contributions and achievements. They regard their learning, experiences and successes as an investment in their development as people, educators, and educational leaders, and not as a means to inflate their egos.

Many have reported that they became principals with a sense of trepidation, and were in awe of the responsibilities of the job. Most acknowledge growing into and in the job, and continue to see the need for further learning, and to engage with others to help them be effective educational leaders. While there is a strong sense of need for principals to establish a vision and set the tone for their schools, there is also recognition of the need to engage other key stakeholders in helping shape these activities.

In their humility and modesty, many of the principals are at pains to give credit to others, especially their staff, for their successes. While not always expressing it explicitly, they tend to imply that their role as principal has been one of service to others, especially to their students, families, and school communities. Operating from a philosophy or orientation of service does not mean that they abrogate their responsibilities as leaders, supervisors and assessors. They see it as their moral and professional responsibility to hold others, especially teachers, accountable for the quality of the educational processes and outcomes in their schools. The difference

seems to be that they do not resort to autocratic, hierarchical, or strict supervisory approaches and practices to achieve these ends. Rather, they rely on professional standards (establishing and maintaining high expectations and holding themselves and others accountable), collegial practices (sharing responsibilities for co-created vision and leadership as well as a focus on educational processes and outcomes using teamwork), learner-focused moral purpose (passion for all students and their needs), and a strategic vision for their school's future (able to deal with short-term problems but always with an eye on long-term goals).

In reading the stories of the principals in this book, one gets a strong sense that they regard it as a great privilege to hold the position of principal, and that they are determined not to misuse the great trust placed in them to lead their school communities and make them special places of learning.

Hard work is accepted

All the principals work hard and commit to long hours every day, often after school hours and on weekends. One might say that, overall, many contribute 'beyond the call of duty.' The principalship is a demanding job full of challenges and pressures, but not one of the principals would wish to do anything else. Indeed, many simply love what they do. The opportunity to make a difference, especially in the lives of the young people in their care, seems to override any negative consideration such as the high workload. These principals seem to acknowledge that the extreme effort and long hours go with the territory and are necessary in order for them to have maximum impact.

Whilst they do work long hours there is also a sense of life balance. Some are very explicit about this and do things like ensuring that they minimise weekend and school holiday work commitments. For others there is a sense that school and life are not necessarily opposites, and that it is indeed difficult to separate them into neat compartments. The main point to note is that the long hours they work is not a stress. These are energetic, passionate and committed people who almost derive energy from their work. As described elsewhere in this chapter, they also gain considerable satisfaction from what they do, and there is invariably understanding and support from families and friends, both important elements in what sustains them.

'Can do' attitude

An aspect of their work ethic is that they have a very positive 'can do' attitude. Problems can be solved, obstacles avoided – obstacles and problems are challenges to be expected and to be overcome. They also have a restlessness, a need to be constantly searching for new ideas, new ways of doing things. Never content with the status quo, they are always seeking to improve their school and help students and staff to improve.

Enjoyment

The principals enjoy their work. For reasons outlined elsewhere in this chapter, they clearly get immense satisfaction from seeing people develop and grow. They also enjoy the challenge of the work, the variety of things that have to be done, the never-

ending quest to improve, the relationships with people, the ability to influence (in many cases this relates not only to the school, but also the wider community), and, we suspect, being an educator during this dynamic period of change.

Key motivators for the principals

Apart from the key themes emerging from the stories, a number of ‘motivators’ can also be identified that are common to most of the principals. Four key motivators are identified and discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

The first motivator relates to the nature of the principals in terms of their own attributes, characteristics, their orientations to life, and their role as educators and educational leaders.

The second focuses on their love of, and commitment to, learning and improvement for themselves as educators and educational leaders, and for the learning and education of others, especially their students.

The third reflects their commitment and dedication to their work as professional educators and leaders – their deep sense of moral purpose – and their motivation to make a difference in the context of their school community, with its own character, needs, pressures and opportunities.

The fourth reflects their ongoing source of motivation and sustenance – an unwavering hope for a better future, especially for the students in their schools.

Special orientation to life and work

This motivator relates to their personal qualities and characteristics, including the development of their values, dispositions, personalities and attitudes that have shaped their behaviours and practices. Many of the principals draw strength and purpose from their past and present family relationships; religious beliefs and/or other belief and value systems; life experiences; formal and informal learning; and the special challenges of leading their schools. These help in forming their ways of understanding their world, their views on the importance of education, and their own identity as teachers, administrators and leaders.

They all have a clear sense of self and an appreciation that relationships are at the heart of leadership, teaching and learning. They possess an acute sense of their own identity and ‘throw themselves’ with zest into their work because one senses they see it as their destiny to make a difference in the lives of others.

They all have the courage of their convictions and make every effort possible to ensure that their schools provide the very best learning environments for their students. They, of course, appreciate that they cannot achieve all this on their own and enlist the talents and energies of others to assist them in their great cause. Indeed, all principals emphasised that successful schools are very much dependent on the teams within the schools. Nevertheless, principals also acknowledge not only their capacity to influence, but also their obligation to do so.

Even those who may have found themselves ‘accidental principals’, have demonstrated special values, beliefs and habits that have guided them in their pursuit of excellence. They are also greatly valued by others for their talents, their energy, their commitment and their enthusiasm.

Love of and for learning

The stories in this book make it clear that all the principals have a love of learning and they work with purpose and dedication to help instil this same love of learning in others. They take great delight in helping promote and support the growth and development of others, especially students, and they get particular satisfaction and a great sense of reward when students who experienced great struggles with their learning at school, go on to be successful in life.

They delight in challenge, change and innovation, so long as all of these inspire others and help create new visions of what can be achieved. Their resilience enables them to deal positively and patiently with obstacles, and to renew, even remake, themselves when necessary. They regard the roller-coaster nature of their experiences in the principalship as energising and, ultimately, very rewarding. Their lives are focused on learning and this learning helps make their lives meaningful, rewarding and fulfilling.

Their principalship is driven by moral purpose

In almost every case in the principals' stories, their understanding of their work as fulfilling – mostly because of its impact on students' learning and lives – has inspired each principal's commitment to his or her school and school community. This notion of being entrusted with the responsibility for creating change, and often altering other people's perceptions of what can be done, motivated these principals to interpret leadership in ways that responded to the special needs of their schools and their students. Some schools were new, others were 'coasting' and in need of revivification, others were beset by the effects of social inequity and injustice for students' lives, and a couple were recovering from severe damage by fire, yet these principals responded with enthusiasm, energy and a sense of hope in the possibility of creating something better.

Their sense of moral purpose is not pursued, however, as a personal cause but analytically, practically and humanely in concert with staff, students and other stakeholders. In some cases it entails developing an enlarged, embodied vision and wholesale change; in others it is more organic and incremental. For some principals, there is a strong connection to a defined educational tradition, particularly those of religious teaching orders, but even here tradition is usually 'redesigned' in the service of today's students.

As one principal noted, it was not the job or position that was attractive, but what you could do once you were a principal. Being a principal of no influence is not an option for these people. They want to make a difference.

Hope for a better future

'Hope for a better future' emerges as a powerful activating force for leadership, change and improvement in the principals' stories. On one level, this hope emerged in terms of the principals' sense of their own professional responsibility to make conditions and outcomes better for all of their students. Their driving vision and hope is for a better and more fulfilling life for these students. This hope underpins their valuation of how

they can and should optimally operate, and it fuels their courage to act decisively (and with a sense of accountability to their school and wider community) with unswerving commitment to the special needs of their schools.

They have hope for their students, staff, parents and community, especially with regard to their capacity to work and learn together. They have hope for the continuing success of their schools, and they clearly understand that their own contributions can make the crucial difference to future school success.

They all seem to project a sense that it is their privilege and destiny to be the key leader of their school in order to help create a special and unique set of learning experiences for their students. An added bonus is that, in all cases, teachers and other staff feel privileged to be part of something unique and special.

Concluding comments

It has been our pleasure to oversee and edit this book. Being a principal is truly an exhilarating job. It is at the same time hectic, exciting, energising, frustrating, impossible, and full of many highs and lows. Yet, and this is the essence of the job, it is deeply satisfying because it involves working with people, primarily students, but also staff, parents and the community, to help them develop and grow. Through this, principals also grow. Ultimately it is society that benefits from an educated, humane and principled population.

We would again like to thank the principals for sharing their stories and the writers for capturing these. Special thanks to Mary-Anne Anderson who helped develop the themes of this chapter, and to Carole Hooper for her expert editorial assistance. A last thank you to Jenny Lewis for her drive, encouragement, and gentle pushing to complete the book – had Jenny not been the CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders for the past few years, she could easily have been the focus of one of the chapters.

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For much of the 1960s, Rod taught in secondary schools in Western Australia, New Zealand, Canada and England. While in London he completed a MA in comparative education. He began tertiary teaching at Adelaide Teachers' College in 1971 and moved to Edith Cowan University in 1973. From 1975 to 1980 he studied on a part time basis for his doctorate in sociology at Murdoch University. For the past six years while at Edith Cowan University, he has been teaching, researching and publishing in the field of middle schooling.

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Robyn is an educational consultant, Executive Member and Fellow of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (Queensland). She is an experienced educator with many years of education leadership in South Australia, Papua New Guinea, the

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Lawrie is a Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Organisational Learning and Leadership at the University of Melbourne. His research interests include successful school leadership, marketing in schools, school accountability and human resource management in schools. Lawrie has had over thirty years experience in principal professional development, school review, and school improvement. He is a frequent commentator on education matters through professional journals, and a regular presenter at international conferences.

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Patrick is Foundation Chair in Educational Leadership and Director of the Flagship for Creative & Authentic Leadership at the ACU National (Australian Catholic University). He has been involved in education for 40 years as a teacher, deputy principal, and principal and in a number of positions from lecturer to professor and dean in tertiary education institutions in Canada, Australia and Brunei. In recognition of Patrick's contribution to educational leadership in Australia and internationally, the Australian Council of Educational Leadership (ACEL) awarded him their Nganakarrawa Award 2002 for excellence in educational leadership; ACEL Distinguished Travelling Scholar in 2004; and a Gold Medal in 2004. In 2005, he was awarded the Microsoft Inaugural New Zealand Travelling Scholar Award. He is currently the President of ACEL. His latest book, published by Cambridge University Press (2006), is titled *Educational leadership: Key challenges and ethical tensions*.

Robert Fitzgerald

Robert is a Research Fellow at the University of Canberra in the Divisions of Communication and Education. He has conducted national and local research on numeracy and literacy, and the use of information and communication technologies

in education. His current work involves technologies that are designed to support collaborative learning and knowledge creation such as wikis, blogs and team learning systems. More generally, Robert is interested in the ways we engage learners in a rapidly changing, and increasingly complex, world. A qualified primary and secondary teacher, Robert's first teaching position was at a small country high school in the Wimmera district of Western Victoria, where he taught mathematics, science and computing. He has held academic positions at four tertiary institutions in Australia and Hong Kong. Robert is a reviewer for a number of international journals and regularly presents at international conferences.

Clinton Golding

Clinton is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, where he specialises in issues relating to thinking and education. As an international expert in this field, he works as a researcher, writer, mentor and teacher educator across New Zealand, Australia and Singapore. He is actively involved in the 'Philosophy for Children' movement, and was the cofounder of the New Zealand association. He previously had the position of Thinking Coordinator in two schools in New Zealand, where his job was to help develop the thinking of staff and students.

Neville Grady

Neville has had a career of more than 40 years in education in schools, the TAFE sector and universities in New South Wales, the Republic of Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Northern Territory and Tasmania. He has a PhD from the University of Tasmania in 1994 with a study of organisational cultures and climates. He has led many professional development activities in a variety of settings and continues to engage in research activities as they present themselves. His current involvement in the educational enterprise is largely to do with engaging students within the School of Management at the University of Tasmania and the School of Education at Charles Darwin University in matters such as 'business research methods', 'socially responsible management' and 'transformative education'.

Jan Gray

Jan is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University. Jan's area of research interest is the challenges in educational policy development and implementation to improve school retention. She is currently working on series of funded projects related to factors impacting on improved school attendance and engagement, including an Australian Research Council funded longitudinal study of student retention and success in high school.

David Gurr

David is a Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Organisational Learning and Leadership at the University of Melbourne. His research interests include leadership, successful school leadership, school accountability and the impact of technology on those working

in schools. David is the Vice-President (Publications and Research) for the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, is current editor of the periodical, *Monograph*, and past editor of the academic journal, *Leading and Managing*, and the periodical, *Hot Topics*.

Fiona Johnston

Fiona lives in Adelaide and is a freelance editor and writer. She has written extensively about education, having recently written the case studies for the Australian Principals' Association Professional Development Committee well-being project. She has published two books of poetry, *Thresholds* (1998) and *Kindling* (2004).

Ian McKay

Until 2005, Ian was Principal and Chief Executive Officer of Blackheath and Thornburgh College in Charters Towers. Prior to that, Ian was Principal of Cairns School of Distance Education and has been a school principal since 1985. He is Past Regional Chair of the Tropical North Queensland Region of the Australian Institute of Management as well as Past Australasian President of the Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools and Past President of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia. He is presently a Director of the Australian Institute for Management (Queensland). Ian has been a Director of AADES Training Ltd, a nationally registered training organisation providing vocational education opportunities for rural areas, and was a founding Director of Milboe Ltd, a non-profit company that raises funds to support children in isolated areas. He is a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management, Australian College of Educators and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders. Ian is a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. In 2002, Ian was awarded a Churchill Fellowship, and in 2004 became one of a select group of Apple Distinguished Educators.

Kathryn Moyle

Kathryn is an Associate Professor at the University of Canberra in the School of Education. In 2005 Kathryn conducted two research projects: one for Teaching Australia (the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) called *Leadership and Learning with ICT*; and the second for the ACT Department of Education and Training investigating principals and teachers views concerning ICT deployments in schools. In the recent past, Kathryn has conducted research on behalf of the Curriculum Corporation, education.au and The Learning Federation. Kathryn has published widely on school education issues concerning leadership, school infrastructure, ICT, equity and school leadership. Prior to moving to Canberra, Kathryn worked for 24 years with the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) in South Australia where she held a variety of roles within schools and in the central office. While in South Australia, Kathryn contributed to the work of several peak boards, including 10 years as a Deputy Board member of the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) and she chaired the Community Arts Network Board of Management.

Madeleine Regan

Madeleine Regan is the principal of a writing business, 'ideas and words'. She has been a secondary teacher and deputy principal and consults and writes widely about education issues.

Ken Thompson

During a career in education of more than 30 years, Ken Thompson has been a teacher, regional officer, state policy officer and, most recently, a principal for over 13 years with the Victorian Department of Education. He has significant experience in school-based innovation. He has written articles, chapters and given lectures internationally on school leadership matters, and has been on the Editorial Board of *Principal Matters*. He is currently completing his Doctorate of Education at the University of Melbourne.

Julie Wells

Julie is the Director, Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory. She has an extensive history as a researcher and writer in government and tertiary sectors.