**WHAT WOULD A SCHOOL BUILT BY WALT DISNEY LOOK LIKE?**

Richard Gerver, in his book ‘Creating Tomorrow’s Schools Today’, asks “Why can’t schools be as exciting as Disney World?” While pondering this question, I have become intrigued by the thought of what a school built by Walt Disney would look like! The more I toss this over in my mind, the more I believe that our profession certainly needs a creative genius of his statue to build a school for the 21st Century - someone whose imagination could build a school that would light the fire of learning in the minds of our students and usher in a paradigm shift in education.

As principal of Wooranna Park Primary School since 1987 I have had three of my six grandchildren attend my school. Seeing your school through the eyes of a loved one can be an interesting experience, full of wonderful and sobering interludes. Being told one Sunday morning that my Prep grade grandson was crying because he couldn’t go to school is very much a highlight, but this needs to be balanced by my inability to answer many of the ‘Why can’t we?’ questions asked of me.Looking through their eyes has fuelled a desire in me to create a school where excitement and challenge pervade children’s learning.

Traditionally schools, despite their core purpose, have been places built to service the needs of teachers, rather than learners. They are places where we “pour” knowledge into students, rather than excite their appetite for learning and where their achievements are graded and compared, rather than celebrated. Worse still they are places where children’s potential is often determined by well-meaning adults, as students internalise the negative and positive labels applied to them, thus creating self-fulfilling prophecies.1 The excitement with which children commence their schooling is all too often replaced with a somewhat subdued acceptance that going to school is just another must do part of growing up. But this is far from the vision of schools that I believe we should be building for today’s students

The rapid advancements in technology, along with an ever increasing ground swell of disengaged students 2, is forcing educators to question their pedagogical practice and to rethink the existing culture of teaching. Enterprising governments and employers are increasingly searching for more than just literate and numerate employees. Creativity, critical thinking, communication skills and ICT literacy are just a few of the 21st Century Skills essential in order to live fulfilling lives.

The changing nature of children is also impacting on how they view schools.3 The digital world is their new “playground”, providing instant gratification and access to the world at large. Maintaining their interest at school requires a real world, authentic approach to curriculum planning, along with a more personalised and differentiated approach to addressing individual student’s needs. Creating such an environment must, I believe, include:

* Teachers allowing students to accept more responsibility for their learning.
* The ubiquitous use of ICT
* The harnessing of social media as an educational tool
* A strong focus on problem solving through collaborative learning
* The teacher’s role expanded to include the roles of mentor and facilitator
* A lessening in the use of grouping children according to age
* Team teaching, where groups of teachers truly share responsibility for students in their care
* A dramatic increase in the use of mentors to assist young students, particularly from the ranks of our skilled retirees
* An interdisciplinary approach to curriculum development, with a prominence given to Futures Study, citizenship, creativity and The Arts; and finally
* An increased focus on ‘real world’ learning, with a recognition of the importance of Asian Literacy for the future of Australia.

I also believe that it is essential that all schools have a clearly defined philosophical direction – a Raison D’être – outlining significant aspects of their school’s beliefs about teaching and learning, their organisational structures and learning environment, along with the school’s approach to curriculum, leadership and assessment. Without such a document it is extremely difficult for teachers to adopt a collective approach to teaching and learning across their school***,*** or upgrade such practices as required. More importantly, unless a school knows where it wants to go, it doesn’t matter which road it takes!’

Since the early 1980’s I have been a firm believer in the need for wide spread changes to how we educate our students. Like Sir Ken Robinson4 I believe our educational system needs to be revolutionised. If we believe the political rhetoric of our politicians, successive governments, both State and Federal, share this belief. Unfortunately, the more they change the peripherals of our system, the more they reinforce traditional beliefs and practices. But the winds of change are blowing, with ever increasing numbers of highly respected educational thinkers demanding change.5

One such educator is Professor Yong Zhao of Michigan State University. In one short video featured on YouTube, titled ‘Catching Up or Leading the Way”, Yong Zhao argues that we need to look further than test scores when assessing the qualities of a good school, to include:

* Citizenship
* Passion for learning
* Creativity
* Entrepreneurship
* Moral and ethical character; and
* Good social attitudes.

When asked what he would do if he was Arnie Duncan, the United States Secretary of Education, he recommended the following:

* Provide incentives to stimulate innovation in schools
* Reward schools that come up with diverse opportunities for students
* Encourage schools to be different rather than all the same
* Definitely not endorse any national testing programs; and most importantly
* Restore confidence in our teachers and schools, rather than focussing on making them more accountable.

Central to Professor Zhao’s thinking is that the United States, (and Australia I would argue), needs a diversity of talent, rather than all schools focussing their attention on a few subject areas. This is in stark contrast with the recent announcements by the Australian Government to focus their Naplan testing on Literacy, Mathematics and Science! I don’t doubt that the Australian Government is acting with the best of intentions. But they are motivated by populist thinking. We need to heed the words of Albert Einstein: “***We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them!”***

The most striking change to schooling, as I envisage, will be the schools themselves; with the building of schools that are alive and vibrant, full of provocations, mysteries and possible investigations that attract children’s interests and foster learning. Increasingly new schools are being built with eye catching architectural features and open spaces for children and teachers to work collaboratively. The Swedish schools designed by architect Rosan Bosch are a standout in this regard.

The Australian Government’s ‘Building the Education Revolution’ program, in response to the global financial crisis, has led to the biggest upgrade of school buildings in Australia’s history. But while pleasing to the eye and certainly more conducive to contemporary learning practices, they are of themselves unlikely to lead to significant changes in teaching practice. Such changes require the support of school leaders and teachers with the determination and vision to challenge the status quo. The problem is twofold. Many teachers believe that the traditional one teacher classroom is still the best way to educate students and, sadly, many teachers simply don’t understand why or how to teach in the more contemporary learning environments.

For the latter group I would recommend the work of David Thornburg.6 David argues that from primordial times humans have learned in four discrete ways: at the Campfire, at the Watering Hole, in the Cave and from Life - metaphors for direct teaching, collaborative learning, learning from oneself, (through reflection and introspection), and applying ones’ learning through putting learning into practice. He uses these metaphors to give purpose and life to the modern open planned school, justifying each metaphor with reference to the writings of such educational “greats” as Vygotsky, Piaget and Papert. In the forward to David’s latest book, ‘From the Campfire to the Holodeck’, Prakash Nair recognises the profound impact David’s writings have had on his work as an architect.7 My school, Wooranna Park Primary, has also prepared a series of thirteen short videos to explain how we personalise children’s learning in open planned settings. These videos are freely available on the school’s website and may prove of assistance to teachers uncertain of how to work in open-planned, team teaching environments.

Even the impact of ICT, while highly significant, has not changed traditional teaching practice. Yes teachers are increasingly embracing ICT in schools, but for many schools such innovations only serve to reinforce the status quo. Thornburg highlights the problem when he comments on the use of interactive whiteboards and clickers in schools: “The problem… is that this technology operates on the assumption that the best way for students to learn is for teachers to stand and deliver presentations”.8 The limited use of social media in schools also highlights this problem! For most children social media dominates their lives out of school. Yet the dangers and intrusiveness associated with students using this medium has prevented many schools from using social media to support children’s learning. In so doing, these schools fail to avail themselves of opportunities to more effectively link students, parents and teachers, in ways never before possible.

Since 1997, Wooranna Park Primary School has sought to create a learning environment for our students and teachers that supports our pedagogical beliefs and despite limited funds and a school design hardly favourable to such a goal, we have succeeded in creating an indoor environment recognised for its creativeness and individuality. The building of ‘Stimulating Learning Platforms (SLP’s) at Wooranna Park has allowed teachers to tap into children’s imagination to create learning environments that despite their imaginary nature are very authentic to children and highly experiential and interdisciplinary. These environments are often launching pads to further experiences. They also give credence to the importance of children’s creative play in supporting their learning.

The recent building of a Dragon Boat and Spaceship in our Years 2 & 3 Learning Units offers new and exciting ways for students and teachers to conceptualise learning and to create problem solving situations, designed to elicit the discovery of new understandings. This raises the possibility that the design of schools in the future may be significantly more interactive, as school planners capitalise on new technology to provide authentic experiences for students, by way of highly interactive, virtual experiences. This is not meant to infer that WPPS has discovered the next paradigm shift in education, but we do think the impact of SLP’s at Wooranna Park is certainly worthy of further research.9

Valerie Hannon uses the term “basecamp” to describe schools when highlighting the advantages of real world learning outside of the school.10 Small group excursions, based on student interest are used extensively at Wooranna Park; but being a highly disadvantaged primary school there is a limit to the number of excursions parents can be expected to pay for. There are also limitations on the number of occasions teachers can be released to supervise small groups of students outside the school.

But could these limitations, when dealing with primary school children, be significantly lessened if schools could be designed to bring the outside world into the school? Online links with places of significance such as NASA and the International Space Station are already available for schools to use. Virtual tours of famous places, museums, art galleries and places like the Smithsonian Institute can also be accessed via the web. The use of video conferencing is already used in schools to access people around the world and government funded theme areas like ACMI and Science Works are popular excursion sites for children that could be more widely used if access to them was available via the web.

The growth of educational software like Mathletics, Intrepica, The Khan Academy, along with an ever increasing variety of Apps available and software programs like Kodo, Game Lab, Scratch, Lego Mindstorm Robotics, Trimble Sketch Up, Evernote, Google Liquid Galaxy and Apple Maps are also presenting new possibilities for innovative teachers. As is the availability of Edmodo and Super Clubs Plus for controlled social communication between students and teachers. But perhaps of even greater significance is the growth of virtual and augmented realities presently being developed for use in schools. The task ahead for educators and governments is to create a school where all of the above are central to children’s learning, rather than peripheral or additional, as is more often the case now.

I believe we can create schools that match the expectations, interests and learning needs of our students - schools that give increased prominence to student/teacher relationships, curriculum relevance and student engagement. But this can only happen when governments cease to see school improvement, with its focus on accountability and high stakes testing, as the panacea for good schooling and recognise that our present educational system was built for a different time and needs to be redesigned, if it is to serve our students well in the 21st Century. We need school’s that excite our student’s appetite for learning and allow them to pursue their passions; schools that accept and recognise children’s differences, while giving them a significant say in the running of their school and encourage them to accept ownership of their learning.

If our system of education is redesigned, then our school buildings will need to be redesigned. This takes us back full circle to the question of what a school built by Walt Disney would look like. What worlds would he create to excite children’s passion for mathematics or literature? How would he persuade the great museums of our world and other holders of knowledge and history to play a role in his students’ learning? What forms of social media would he use? What virtual and augmented worlds would he craft to allow students to experience the great events of history, or travel through time to experience the Age of the Dinosaurs, or visit distant galaxies? As a principal who once built a large Time Machine for his Year 1 students, I am certain, (well reasonably certain), that any school built by Walt Disney would have a Time Machine!

What’s that you say!

*What about our two hour literacy blocks and our one hour blocks for mathematics? Students can’t learn unless we teach them.*

You’re right! Teachers would have to play an active role in any school built by Walt Disney. But I also know that Shakespeare never learnt to write in a two hour literacy block and Archimedes was at his most creative best in his bathtub!

***That leaves us with only one task. Find the next Walt Disney!***

*Endnotes*

1. *See: Rosenthal R & Jacobson L. ‘Pygmalion in the Classroom”, 1968.*
2. *Valerie Hannon, Learning Futures: Can we redesign schools into relevance? Centre for Strategic Education, Seminar Series Paper No. 213, April 2012, pp 5-7.*
3. *See: Michael McQueen, The New Rules of Engagement – A Guide to understanding and connecting with Generation Y.*
4. *TED Presentation, Sir Ken Robinson: Bring on the Learning Revolution, May 2010.*
5. *The above remarks are strongly influenced by the philosophical beliefs that underpin the Reggio Emilia schools of Northern Italy, along with the presentations and writings of: Ken Robinson; Stephen Heppell; Yong Zhao; Sugata Mitra; Alan November; Pasi Sahlberg; Andy Hargreaves; Valerie Hannon and George Betts.*
6. *See: Thornburg, D.D. ‘Campfires in Cyberspace’, Starsong Publications, 1999; ‘From the Campfire to the Holodeck’, Jossie –Bass, In press, 2013.*
7. *Thornburg, ‘From the Campfire to the Holodeck’, Forward.*
8. *Thornburg, ‘From the Campfire to the Holodeck’, Chapter 6.*
9. *Wooranna Park Primary School’s leadership team is presently undertaking a research project with Monash University into the impact of Stimulating Learning Platforms.*
10. *Hannon, p.10.*

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