

## **Sustainable Change! Arts! Education! Innovation! Education through the arts: Reframing the experience**

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This chapter documents change in a school that caters for children with a range of disabilities. Curriculum change has necessitated administrative change. What we present below is, we believe, an exemplary model in school improvement.

The traditional delivery of curriculum has generally been inappropriate for students at Port Phillip Specialist School, which caters for very young children up to age 18 with a wide range of disabilities. Their needs are such that it does not make sense merely to duplicate the curriculum that is offered in mainstream schools. The majority of children are working between Levels 1 to 3 of Victoria's Curriculum & Standards Framework II (Years 1 to 4 of primary school), but some are performing below this.

Three years ago the principal of Port Phillip Specialist School, Bella Irlicht AM, confronted four basic issues:

- How to make the curriculum more meaningful and ensure optimal development for the school's unique students, aged from three to eighteen.
- How to resource the project in terms of both human and physical resources.
- How to maximize the engagement of staff and the wider school community in the process of change.
- Where to find the right people who could lead the process. That is, how to find empathetic consultants.

The principal wanted to move from what Fullan (1993) has referred to as "personal vision-building" to "shared-vision building" (p. 13). She was well aware of the element of risk-taking in this entrepreneurial process.

Underscoring the process was the principal's belief in the power of the arts – music, dance, drama and visual art. She was convinced that the answer to the first issue lay in making the arts the basis of the curriculum, given the students' unique learning and developmental needs. What has evolved is an innovative curriculum the core of which is the Arts – music, dance, drama, and visual art. The arts underpin all areas of the curriculum, including literacy and numeracy. But it is arts therapy, and not simply arts education, that is integral to this approach. The following discussion elucidates the school's approach to this project.

### **Context/Background**

The principal was appointed to the school in 1988. Known then as South Melbourne Special Development School, it was a small house with only three cramped rooms, a tiny backyard and infested with white ants. There were six staff and of the twenty students, many were over eighteen years of age. There were almost no resources. The first major project was the building of an in-ground trampoline. It was launched in

style, circled by a huge ribbon which was cut by the Director of Education. From the outset the school celebrated success and this has continued to the present day.

Even in those early days the principal could see the importance of bringing the local community on board. As the community at that stage was predominantly Greek, working with the bursar she organized a Greek dinner dance. The principal hasn't stopped bringing in the community! Flushed with the financial success of the dinner dance she proceeded to run fashion parades on an annual basis. In turn she attracted a number of high profile people who offered considerable financial and in-kind support. And her network over the years has snowballed.

The principal realized that if the school was to grow it needed an appropriate site. She was conscious that although governments change and policies change it is governments nonetheless that set directions and she saw it as imperative that she attempt to influence government as far as special education is concerned. As she has said, "I had to become a politician."

At this time, Nott St. Primary School in Port Melbourne was closed as part of a reorganization of Victorian schools. Irlicht approached the General Manager of the Southern Metropolitan Region, pointing out that her three-room school was growing. By this stage, although the older students had left, the enrolment had increased to 45. Her agitation was successful and the school moved into Nott St. in 1997, having coped as best it could for nine years in extremely unsatisfactory premises. In making the move, the School Council chose the name 'Port Phillip' because it better represented the school's catchment area. It was renamed a 'Specialist School' (as distinct from a Special School) to reflect that it had specialists working in a special education facility. Even today the term 'specialist' is used as the more positive term, in that it takes the emphasis away from the nature of the children.

Two overseas trips helped Bella Irlicht formulate her vision for specialist education. After the first, in 1993 to the USA and Britain, she decided to establish a Think Tank in order to help the school with its future direction. She called in some 'high flyers', all of whom had been successful in business. In essence she said, "You're bright, think about what expertise you can bring to the school." As she recalls, "What I really wanted them to do was talk-up the school." This developed into the dynamic Port Phillip Foundation, which was incorporated in 2000. It currently includes a former Area Manager of a major bank, two lawyers, an accountant, and business people, two of whom are parents. It has been invaluable in the development of the school.

The second overseas trip, primarily to the USA, was undertaken in 1996 as a result of being awarded a Churchill Scholarship and this was instrumental in Irlicht developing a research perspective. It was this scholarship, she believes, that gave her an imprimatur: as she said, "People listened." She found the confidence after returning from her Churchill study tour to take the initiative and consult not one but three government ministers (Health, Education, and Community Services) in order to get extra support for her school. As she has said, "I was a bit naïve." But it proved to be worthwhile.

In the early days of moving into the new school in Nott St. there was relatively little money for infrastructure. Irlicht managed to secure surplus furniture from the National Australia Bank as this coincided with the closure of some banking premises. She carpeted the school by negotiating off-cuts at a heavily reduced rate from large carpet company. And with community support the school quickly built its hydrotherapy pool. The school raised half of the money: the rest was done on goodwill or, as she describes it, "on the smell of an oily rag". Pioneer Concrete, for example, donated concrete, and plumbers worked for nothing. As a consequence it was built for half of the projected cost. This extremely valuable resource is used every day. After school it is used for toddlers. It has, effectively, become a community pool.

From the beginning the concept of the Fully Serviced School has guided the growth and direction of the school. Today, for example, the upstairs area comprises a Dental Clinic, a Paramedical Centre, and an IT Centre, and also includes extra classrooms. Private donations have paid for a great deal in the school, including the extremely large rotunda in the school grounds. Philanthropic and community support remain a key feature of this school. Brian Caldwell in *Re-imagining the Self-managed School* (2004) states, "The social capital of Port Phillip Specialist School is . . . impressive by any standards (p.42)." Half of the money for the Performing Arts Centre, which is currently being built to support the new arts curriculum, is being raised by the school. The Pratt Foundation has committed \$3000,000 and the Friends of Port Phillip Specialist School, along with the Foundation, will raise the balance of the funds needed to complete the project. The Department of Education & Training, through its Community Facilities Fund, has contributed \$1 million. The Centre will be completed in the second half of 2005.

Over the years the principal has ensured that the school developed partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders: teachers, parents, the Department of Education & Training, philanthropic organisations, and companies or individuals willing to provide financial or in-kind support. This has required strong networking and it has taken some years to develop to where it is today. It is recognized that networks are not ends in themselves but must be assessed, as Fullan (2005) notes, "in terms of changing the cultures of schools" (p. 19). The principal has always been committed to the need for strong, ongoing relationships between 'external' support groups and the internal school teams. Indeed, the development of diverse partnerships and networks has underscored the development of the school over many years.

The process of enlisting such diverse support has not been without its problems. Self interest, for example, can sometimes outweigh philanthropic interest. There has, accordingly, been an emphasis on 'balancing' partnerships. All of this points to the importance of being able to manage change to deal with such issues. And it throws into the spotlight the nexus between development, empowerment, and management. Throughout the process the principal has been cognizant of the importance of having the big picture and, at the same time, aiming for a sense of balance. It is, needless to say, a difficult process. And it was recognized from the outset that accountability must be embedded into the process. Some of the current valued partnerships include The

University of Melbourne, the Victorian College of the Arts, La Trobe University, RMIT University, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

## CULTURE

Fullan (2005) has defined culture as the “shared values and beliefs in the organization” (p. 57). It was recognized from the start of the project described here that changing the culture of the school for the better would be difficult but not impossible.

For some years the school has been committed to the notion of a collaborative school for, as Fullan (1999; p.27) states, a collaborative culture is important not just because of the support that is provided but also because such a culture recognizes the value of dissonance inside and outside the organization. Further, “effective collaborative cultures are not based on like-minded consensus. They value diversity because that is how they get different perspectives and access to ideas to address complex problems” (Fullan, 1999, pp. 36-37).

Embedded into the culture of the school is recognition of the fact that the children who attend don't necessarily learn like other children. Or to put it differently, the learning styles that are stressed in mainstream schools are often ineffective or inappropriate in this school. Essentially, children in this school, regardless of their age, learn by doing. Consequently, an ongoing task for the school is to maximize opportunities for the children to be involved with their whole body and mind. The school has long been aware of involving every sense. This, of course, is what the arts, collectively, do. No other medium involves every sense in the way that the arts do. And it is for this reason that the arts are at the core of the new curriculum. They underpin *all* teaching and learning.

As has been suggested, strong support from the diverse community is also part of the school's culture. That the broad school community is on side is demonstrated by the fact that all sectors are involved and funding has come from across the board. Over the years a culture of giving has been engendered. Professor Brian Caldwell, a former Dean of The University of Melbourne and a longtime supporter of the school, who is documenting the school's change process, writes:

As far as philanthropy is concerned, public schools in Australia draw little support compared to their counterparts in England. However, an outstanding example is the support of the private sector for the Port Phillip Specialist School in Port Melbourne. Serving about 140 students with moderate to severe disabilities, the 'full service school' brings together a range of education and health services on one site. Successive state governments have helped fund the extensive refurbishment of the formerly derelict site. (Caldwell, 2004, p. 42)

Even more recently, Caldwell wrote in a letter to the principal:

What you and your colleagues have achieved at Port Phillip is exemplary in personalized learning and is helping to shape the new image of the self-managing school. (7 February 2005.)

It should be added that the school has now raised \$1 million towards the cost of the new centre.

This is a school where the culture is such that parents get excited because the children come home singing. It is a school where teachers walk along the corridors singing at the top of their voice. As someone recently remarked, "You can touch that!"

It is also a school where it is readily apparent that everyone is heading in the same direction. It is significant that many speak of "our family at Port Phillip Specialist School". And parents talk about "our performing arts centre". Everyone is talking the language! This applies also to the Department of Education & Training, which has strongly embraced the vision. The Deputy Secretary, Mr. Darrell Fraser, launched the new Visual and Performing Arts Curriculum in December 2004, and spoke with enthusiasm of the innovative nature of the project and the positive direction of the school. Indeed, strong support by him and the Regional Director, Ms Jan Lake, has been a great impetus in ensuring the success of an exemplar government school. In a recent letter to the school, thanking them for the donation of a painting by the students, which is prominently displayed in his office, Fraser comments, "Your art work is a wonderful example of what you achieve in your school community."

In embarking on the design and implementation of the new, arts-based curriculum, the principal set out to re-focus if not change aspects of the culture in order to implement the change she envisaged. She was acutely aware, as Schein (1996) has written:

What cannot be ignored by leaders is that the destruction of culture is extremely costly on a human level. Large numbers of people have to face the fact that the way they have been thinking and feeling is no longer functional. Personal change at this level is typically difficult, so people who represent the old way tend to be forced out of the organization. (p. 66)

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) add to this perspective in terms of the inevitability of casualties:

Accepting casualties signals your commitment. If you signal that you are unwilling to take casualties, you present an invitation to the people who are uncommitted to push your perspectives aside. Without the pinch of reality, why should they make sacrifices and change their ways of doing business? Your ability to accept the harsh reality of losses sends a clear message about your courage and commitment to seeing the adaptive challenge through (p.99).

Happily, there have been relatively few casualties. In part this is probably because of the culture of professional growth that the school has developed over some years. As Schein (1996) has observed:

The organizations that have survived and made important transitions over many decades seem to have always had a cultural core that was fundamentally functional – a commitment to learning and change; a commitment to people and to all of the stakeholders in the organization, including customers, employees, suppliers, and stockholders; and a commitment to building a healthy, flexible organization in the first place. If such a cultural core does not exist from the beginning, the organization may not survive in the in the long run, especially as environmental turbulence increases. (p. 67)

The cultural core at Port Phillip Specialist School has always been strongly functional. Essential to the change process was the sharing concerns amongst all staff and providing opportunities for the staff as a whole to address them. Team building consequently became a focus of the change process.

## **CURRICULUM**

At the core of the new arts-based curriculum is an understanding of learning and teaching in its many applications. It encompasses a diverse range of learning styles and needs, some of which are not always covered by traditional curricula. The new curriculum acknowledges that some children learn aurally, others visually, and others kinaesthetically. In the Port Phillip curriculum the arts provide a ‘hook’ for every type of learner. But it needs to be stated that in another context, with quite a different student clientele, we could substitute the arts with, for example, internationalization or ESL: the model and the processes of curriculum renewal and change would be the same. At the same time, it is worth noting, as Fullan (1999) has written, “Transferability of ideas is a complex problem of the highest order” (p. 63).

In getting to this point it was essential that the principal as leader set the scene to ensure that everyone was willing to come into a reviewing and renewing process. Positively, the majority of the staff shared her belief in the power of the arts. A team of external experts/facilitators was appointed to manage the change process. Pam Russell, who was well-known to Bella Irlicht, was effectively the Project Manager. Under Russell’s direction the team began by working with staff across a range of focus groups, with many staff members joining more than one such group. In addition, the experts/facilitators audited good practice. This enabled them to develop the new curriculum with due consideration and acknowledgement of the school’s existing curriculum and practices.

As a result of the process of curriculum change, the school now emphasizes not only that it has a music specialist, but also a music therapist; not only an art specialist, but also an art therapist; not only a drama specialist, but also a drama therapist; not only a movement specialist, but also a dance therapist. The school has defined and embraced the difference between an arts specialist and an arts therapist, and is emphasizing more strongly than before the value of the therapist. And they all work closely with the paramedical staff: the physiotherapist, occupational therapists, and speech therapists.

The philosophy of the new curriculum does not see the therapists as being something 'additional': not only are they essential to the program, but classroom teachers too are being assisted to incorporate arts therapy themselves into their work with the children. A similar model has recently been developed in a Victorian DE&T primary school where approximately 80% of students come from a non-English speaking background. Rather than merely bringing in specialist ESL teachers the school has set about training all teachers in the school to become ESL teachers and thus embed ESL teaching into the core program. A similar approach is being developed at Port Phillip with regard to arts therapy.

The new curriculum at Port Phillip is one where every child is involved in the whole program. The new curriculum, further, is viewed on a continuum whereby the focus is on the continuum rather than a particular stage. The emphasis is the child and not the class or the age group. This, of course, will require time to gain acceptance by parents of the new direction.

Essentially the curriculum attempts to achieve what Fullan has identified in the writing of Cox and deFrees (1991). It is concerned with:

- Building a shared vision of what students should know and be able to do.
- Defining student outcomes that bring the vision to life.
- Distilling and integrating the curriculum along with broadening the repertoire of instructional strategies.
- Altering assessment to capture what students know in order to inform the next step.
- Expanding professional development to include learning while doing and learning from doing. (cited in Fullan 1993, p. 60).

It needs to be stressed that putting the Arts at the core of the curriculum was not seen as a 'quick fix', or as an 'add-on'. It has been integral to the process and continues to inform developments.

With the senior students, some of whom are studying for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, the philosophy is that unless they learn to participate at this age they will not be able to participate in the community after they leave the school. The curriculum focuses on children understanding themselves as learners. This entails understanding who they are, what they can and can't do, and how they can use this understanding in order to contribute as fully as possible in the broader community. This is undertaken as a whole school focus.

### **Results of the Change Process / The Future**

Port Phillip Specialist School has used research knowledge and the support of outside experts/facilitators to help teachers make the curriculum – the learning - sustainable. This has entailed building the philosophy into all that is done within the school, including the administration of the school. That is, teachers' understanding of students as learners is being embedded into the administrative structure and culture of the school. It is an approach that ensures that everybody is involved and everyone

participates. It is a system that ensures that all teachers cover the key elements in a way that is appropriate for the particular student. It is based on a model developed by Russell and associates for the South-Eastern Lutheran Schools in Australia.

Of course these are early days – the curriculum only came into place at the beginning of 2005. No doubt there will be new – even unexpected - issues to be confronted. A disconcerting perspective was provided recently when a teacher from a middle class government primary school – one from which most students go on to elite private schools at the secondary level – arranged for her Grade 6 students to visit the school to learn something about disability and difference. One parent objected and refused her child permission to go, saying that she did not want her child to be exposed to these sort of children! For those who did attend, the visit was extremely successful and there are now plans to broaden this program. Sadly, combatting such prejudice will always be an issue for schools like this.

Although the Performing Arts Centre will not be completed until later in the year, new staff have already been brought on board, including arts therapists and a senior administrative appointment of a curriculum leader with wide experience in curriculum and the arts. That is, the school has not waited for the building to be completed before engaging new staff. Other developments are less apparent. For example, two classroom teachers are also qualified music teachers and therapists, and one of the Assistants is also a dance teacher. And already the school is receiving many more enquiries from parents and prospective teachers. One parent in China, whose family is moving to Australia, has even recently contacted the principal after reading about the innovative program on the internet.

An ongoing challenge will be how best to induct new teachers into the culture of the school. Already, much effort has been put into this with teachers who commenced in 2005. The process of induction is ongoing and will continue to be so. Early in the year, for example, staff went on an overnight retreat to an extremely picturesque country club to explore further the new directions. Every effort is being made to enable them to embrace the new culture. The school recognizes that finding time for change enhances the prospects for success. Already, it's not uncommon to hear such comments as "You can feel the positiveness of the place". There has been an increased and ongoing emphasis on team-building and a shared sense of purpose. Central to this process of cultural regeneration and transmission has been the importance of working from a set of shared beliefs and understandings. This doesn't, of course, mean that these are rigid: on the contrary, they will always evolve.

It is important to note that despite the enormity of this project, staff have continued to be valued in the present. For example, it became evident in 2004 that the playground needed to be totally upgraded. The school went to the extreme of providing the best possible, state of the art playground and surface. This necessitated diverting \$150,00 from the performing arts project to do this. Already \$99,000 has been put back through a very important foundation. The point is that the needs of the present were not neglected.

The principal is the first to admit that she couldn't have done it alone. As Kouzes and Posner (1996) have said:

Leadership is not a solo act. In the thousands of personal-best leadership cases we have studied, we have yet to encounter a single example of extraordinary achievement that occurred without the active involvement and support of many people. We don't expect to find any in the future, either. (p. 106)

At the same time the principal is cognizant of the fact that the core purpose can be lost when the leader leaves. And so succession planning is increasingly becoming an important consideration. But regardless of when she eventually leaves, an even more immediate issue is that of sustainability: this has informed the process to date and will continue to do so. And sustainability, according to Fullan (2005) "requires continuous improvement, adaption, and collective problem solving in the face of complex challenges that keep arising" (p. 22). Indeed, Fullan goes so far as to argue: "The mark of an effective leader at the end of his or her tenure is not so much the impact on the bottom line . . . but rather how many good leaders he or she leaves behind who can go even further (p. 35). Irlicht acknowledges the challenge. All of this begs the question of the importance of identifying "ideas and strategies that will promote systems thinking" (Fullan 2005, p. 43). Fullan adds:

I am not talking about producing armchair system thinkers. It will be "system thinkers in action" who count. They may not have the best elaborate theories of how systems evolve over the long run, but they will be in the midst of action with a system perspective. And they will interact with others to promote system awareness through their actions and conversations . . . (Fullan 2005, p. 43).

To a large extent this could describe Irlicht's intentions many years ago when she established the Port Phillip Foundation, which has been a major force in the school's success.

In describing her mission, the principal speaks of her ongoing passion and commitment to providing the time and space for outstanding learning for special needs students and an exemplary learning and teaching model for all schools. What is encouraging is that already the school has been cited nationally and internationally as best practice.

Finally, let us acknowledge, as Fullan (2005) has stated:

it takes less skill to resist than to learn. Resistance comes naturally; learning complicated things in a group setting does not. It is easy for people to avoid or fail to persist in the deep, cognitive, emotional, and political learning cycles that will be needed to sustain the group's focus on complex new challenges. (p. 101)

Happily, resistance is not an issue at Port Phillip. We believe that the staff at Port Phillip Specialist School will continue to demonstrate the positive features of change and sustainability in what is surely one of the most innovative approaches to school change that this country has seen.

And in saying this we believe it is important to recognize that there are many children in our mainstream schools who work in the 'twilight zone' and who are not recognized as being disabled. These are children who have become - or are at risk of becoming - disengaged. Some become part of the judicial or welfare system. Unfortunately, these 'twilight kids' are often not picked up on disability and impairment measures because their level of operation is too high. At the same time, it needs to be said, that they too would benefit from an inclusive curriculum that is targeted at the child and not the class or an age group. The writers contend that a similar program would also go a long way towards addressing the needs of these children.

The fact is that we now have a lot of research - particularly relating to the Middle Years - telling us that there are countless children who are not engaged in learning. We now know much more about learning styles. What we haven't done is provide learning experiences for teachers to enable them to take the knowledge gained from research into their practice. We have not been very successful in embedding the research knowledge into the culture of the school. That is, we haven't assisted teachers to take theory into their practice. It is this that is being addressed with fervour at Port Phillip Specialist School. And it is being done through the arts, which are underpinning all areas of the curriculum, including literacy and numeracy.

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**Bella Irlicht AM**, is the Principal of Port Phillip Specialist School. Throughout her career she has gained the reputation as innovative teacher, excellent counsellor and an outstanding educator. In 1988 she was appointed principal at South Melbourne Special Developmental School and in 1997 helped transform the school into what is now known

as Port Phillip Specialist School. Through her leadership the school has gained the reputation as being one of Australia's leading schools catering for students with special needs.

Bella has been the recipient of numerous awards for outstanding achievement and contribution to the profession, including Order of Australia (2003), Paul Harris Fellow awarded by Rotary International (2000), Professor John Miller Medal (2000), Churchill Fellow (1996), and a Queens Trust Award (1993). She is a Fellow of the Australian College of Education (1988) and a Fellow of the Australian Principals Centre. She has also been a finalist in the Telstra's Business Women's Award and is extensively involved in the broader community where she is on various committees and project teams.

**Pam Russell** has had extensive teaching, consulting and research experience in primary, secondary and tertiary settings. She has been a Director of Curriculum and Vice Principal (Learning and Teaching) in prominent private schools. She is the Immediate Past President (Victorian Branch) of The Australian College of Educators, and the National Director of Tournament of Minds. Pam is a Fellow in the Department of Learning & Educational Development at The University of Melbourne, and a Fellow of The Australian College of Educators. She is also Chairperson of the Education Committee for Churchill Fellowships (Victoria). In her management of projects there is a strong emphasis on change management using a participatory approach that facilitates commitment.

**Professor Martin Comte** is an Education and Arts Consultant and was formerly Dean of the Faculty of Education & Training at RMIT University. He was appointed to the first Chair in Music Education established by an Australian university. He is a Past President and Honorary Life Member of the Australian Society for Music Education, and a former Chair of the international Commission on Music in Schools & Teacher Education. For many years he was editor of the *Australian Journal of Music Education*. Along with Sandi Ferrari, Phillipa Clarke and Rob Newall he was one of the specialists engaged in the design of the arts-based curriculum described in this article.