

## **IMMERSION IN THE ARTS FOR LEARNING & LIVING**

**Paper presented at 'Backing our Creativity' Conference  
sponsored by the Australia Council  
Melbourne, September 14, 2005**

**Bella Irlicht, Martin Comte, Pam Russell, Brian Caldwell**

My three colleagues and I want to tell you about a change process based around the Arts at Port Phillip Specialist School. The school caters for children from age 3 to 18 with a wide range of disabilities.

The traditional delivery of curriculum has generally been inappropriate for students at Port Phillip Specialist School. 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 (that is, Years 1 to 4 of primary school), but some are performing below this.

What we present is an exemplary model in school improvement.

In presenting this to you we are discussing it from four related perspectives. I am addressing the "Why". Professor Martin Comte is concerned with the "What". Mrs. Pam Russell with the "How". And Professor Brian Caldwell is concerned with the "Now What", in other words, how does this fit into a larger picture.

Three years ago, as Principal of Port Phillip Specialist School, I confronted four basic issues: Firstly, how to make the curriculum more meaningful to ensure optimal development for the school's unique students. Secondly, how to resource the project in terms of both human and physical resources. Thirdly, how to maximize the engagement of staff and the wider school community in the process of change. And fourth, where to find the right people who could lead the process.

Underscoring this was my belief in the power of the arts. I was convinced that the answer to the first issue (how to ensure optimal development for the students) 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 now underpin all areas of the curriculum, including literacy and numeracy.

The children at Port Phillip Specialist School are different. Their needs are different. And therefore the delivery of curriculum needs to be different. Our children generally don't learn like many other children. The learning styles that are stressed in mainstream schools are often inappropriate in this school where children, regardless of their age, learn by doing. Consequently, an ongoing task is to maximize opportunities for the children to be involved with their whole body and mind. It is essential that we involve every sense. This, of course, is what The Arts, collectively, do. No other medium does it so well. And it is for this reason that The Arts are at the core of the new curriculum.

The experience of our teachers over many years has been that arts activities facilitate development and learning in a range of areas. In part it is the non-verbal nature of the arts. And in part it is because children can express things in music, movement, dance, drama and visual art that they are unable to express in language. (This, of course, is true also for children in regular schools.)

And so we at Port Phillip Specialist School set about the task of reviewing and re-writing our entire curriculum. And this is where our outstanding team of Consultants became integral to the project. There were no appropriate models for writing a curriculum for a specialist school that had the arts as the basis of learning and teaching of all subjects.

Effectively, we have turned our curriculum upside down and come up with a radical alternative to teaching and learning in specialist schools. We have designed a curriculum that is sensory in nature – a curriculum in which the arts are explored and used educationally, instrumentally and therapeutically to maximize sensory experience, development and learning across all curriculum areas, including English and Mathematics.

To implement the curriculum we saw the need to build a dedicated Visual and Performing Arts Centre. We received financial assistance from a range of philanthropic organizations, individuals and the state government. This Centre, which is being officially opened in a few hours, has cost 2.3 million dollars.

## **NOW, LET ME MOVE ON TO MARTIN COMTE'S PERSPECTIVE - THE 'WHAT' . . .**

Our challenge here was threefold: Firstly, to develop an arts culture within the school. Secondly, to integrate learning within the framework of the arts. And third, to establish a nexus between Arts Therapy and Arts Education.

At the outset it needs to be stressed that in wishing to put The Arts at the centre of the curriculum the aim was **not** to downgrade essential areas of learning: on the contrary, the aim was to use the arts instrumentally, as tools to learning across the broad curriculum perspective, so that English, Mathematics and other Key Learning Areas were taught more effectively than in a traditional curriculum model.

It also needs to be noted that in a school of this type the arts have not only an educational role, but also a therapeutic role. For children in our school Arts Therapy is extremely important. And so another aim of the project was to strengthen the school's commitment to the arts as therapy as distinct from an emphasis on arts education. The goals of these two streams – arts education and arts therapy – are not the same, even though there are some overlaps in terms of process. But in addition to these two approaches, the vision brings in a third stream: the arts as a *tool* for learning across all curriculum areas – again, as with therapy, understanding of the arts *per se* is not the primary goal in this approach. Underpinning **all three streams** is an emphasis on sensory learning.

To some extent, the school already had an arts culture. But what was not apparent were the

linkages between the arts in education and arts therapy. It is important in our school that arts educators and arts therapists work collaboratively.

We had to set about establishing a culture in which it was recognized that the arts in education and the arts in therapy need not be seen as discrete areas. And relatedly, we also had to ensure that each art form was not treated as a separate, rigid entity: between art forms themselves there is also a degree of overlap. A teacher or an arts therapist working in music, for example, can easily slide into a dance or dramatic activity, where appropriate. In other words, it is important that our arts teachers and our arts therapists feel free to move from one arts modality to another according to student needs. Of course, this requires much more flexibility in thinking on the part of arts educators and arts therapists compared to working in one arts modality only. This flexibility underpins the use of the arts in our new curriculum.

We had to make some new appointments, particularly in relation to arts therapy. No longer are arts therapists seen as 'additional': they are essential to the overall program. And classroom teachers too are being assisted to incorporate arts therapy into their work with the children.

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 dance specialist, but also a dance therapist. The school has defined and embraced the differences and commonalities between an arts specialist and an arts therapist, and is emphasizing more strongly than it has in the past the value of the therapist. And all of these specialists work closely with the paramedical staff located at the school: the physiotherapist, occupational therapists, and speech therapists.

Just as we can see in works of art the vision of the artist, the composer, the choreographer and the playwright, we can also see the vision of our students through their artwork. Their creative endeavours, their performance abilities, their interpretive qualities and their overall participation in the arts all enable them to communicate and comment on themselves and their world. What a powerful tool the arts provide for teaching and learning!

## **NOW, LET ME MOVE ON TO PAM RUSSELL'S PERSPECTIVE – THE 'HOW' . . .**

The process for the review and development of the curriculum had three key stages: Initiation, Implementation, and Institutionalisation.

The **Initiation Stage** included, *firstly*, developing the vision for the new curriculum with staff, the school community and the broader community. *Secondly*, gaining commitment from these stakeholders to undertake the project. And, *thirdly*, engaging an Educational Consultant, Pam Russell, to manage the curriculum change process.

Pam became the Project Manager. Her belief is that bringing about change in an organization requires careful planning, choice of appropriate processes, and implementation over time, enabling engagement by all members of the organisation. And keep in mind that the development and implementation of our new arts-based curriculum was undertaken in parallel to the designing and building of the school's Visual and Performing Arts Centre.

Pam developed a process that ensured the involvement of all staff and celebrated and utilized existing good practice. To this end, she formed a team of consultants with expertise in arts education, arts therapy, special education, and curriculum development. The team of consultants, informed by the principal's vision, and data collected from all stakeholders, designed the new Visual and Performing Arts curriculum.

At the second stage, **Implementation**, a Curriculum Co-ordinator was appointed to support staff as they re-framed the delivery of the new, innovative curriculum. This necessitated reviewing all school policies within the framework of the new model. At the same time, new staff were employed to implement the curriculum.

The third stage is that of **Institutionalisation**. This is ongoing and will include an evaluation of the program at the end of this, the first, year. The program will continue to develop and evolve over time. We will know that the curriculum has been institutionalised when people say "At Port Phillip Specialist School we do everything through the Arts."

#### **THE FOURTH, AND FINAL, PERSPECTIVE – 'NOW WHAT' – IS PROVIDED BY BRIAN CALDWELL.**

We believe that these developments at Port Phillip Specialist School have international significance for a number of reasons. The school is an example of an educational institution with high social capital. Increasingly, schools around the world find that they cannot 'go it alone' in their efforts to meet expectations. Certainly, we have formed a number of partnerships to achieve desired goals for our students.

There is also increasing interest around the world in school systems that personalize learning, that is, adopt approaches to learning and the support of learning that treat the *student* (and not the classroom or the school itself) as the key unit of organization. This is part of the 'new enterprise logic of schools'. Personalising learning places particular demands on the school and its teachers, especially in respect to the design of learning experiences, timetabling and assessment. For mainstream schools, this is seen as particularly difficult, because they are not normally organized or resourced for such an approach. Many consider it an impossible challenge in large schools. We however, have 'bit the bullet' and personalized learning because we recognize the nature of the differences among our students. We believe that mainstream schools can learn from our approach. It is an approach that can be adapted to any school no matter the size.

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 schools haven't done is provide learning experiences

for teachers to enable them to take the knowledge gained from research into their practice. Education systems 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.

Another feature of our school is the manner in which we network the support of our teachers with several experts in the private and public sectors who are 'on call' to assist on any matter. When combined with a specialization in the arts, whose pedagogies are more personalized than in any other area of the curriculum, the power of personalization is increased significantly.

We haven't turned to the arts as a soft option. Far from it! We've embarked on an experiment that we believe will have great benefits for our students. It's an experiment that will be the subject of ongoing evaluation and refinement over the coming years.

In conclusion, let me leave you with this thought: When people talk about schools they talk about primary schools, secondary schools, and the 'other'. We're not the 'other.' Port Phillip Specialist School is a world leader. We're leaders because we have a deep knowledge about how kids learn and about setting goals. We've implemented a world-class curriculum based on sound principles that could be effective for all children in all schools. We're definitely not the 'other'! By using The Arts as the basis of our teaching at Port Phillip we are not only renewing children's perceptions – but giving them and those who work with them *new* perceptions.

We gain inspiration from Walt Disney who said, "If you can dream it, you can do it. Always remember," he said, "that this whole thing was started with a dream and a mouse!"