

**The Chameleon Principal**

*A reconceptualisation of the notion of leadership as seen within the context of  
a rural primary school and its community.*

**Submitted by**

**Angela Kelly**

**Diploma Teaching  
Bachelor Applied Science  
Master Educational Leadership**

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degree of  
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**School of Teaching and Learning  
Faculty of Education**

**Australian Catholic University  
Research Services  
Locked Bag 4115  
Fitzroy  
Victoria 3065  
Australia  
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## STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP AND SOURCES

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

**Signed:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



## **ABSTRACT**

This narrative autoethnography tells the story of a small rural community over a ten year period through the ethnographic eye. It is told within the context of a primary rural school and the community that supports it. It reflects the aspirations, the pain and the dreams of the community.

Within the telling of stories, lies the question of what a leader needs to 'be' for the people (the concept of educational leadership). This 'being' for the people should certainly be part of the body of thought on educational leadership. The literature review examines concepts of educational leadership pertaining to aspects or issues of change, community, teaching and learning and the inner life of the Principal. These issues are explored within the framework of the school and its community. Combining literary and ethnographic techniques allows the creation of a story that intends to devise a concept of educational leadership created by and authentic to the community to which the leadership belongs.

This narrative autoethnography provides the vehicle for the researcher to explore Principal / Leadership. It connects modern day educational theory to an understanding of lived experiences – the stories lived by the people in the research. A multi-perspective approach is applied to provide analytical interpretation and reflection of the lived experience documented.

The findings of this research study suggest that Principals need to reflect on the lived experiences of the communities they are within in order to understand the path of leadership.

The research strongly recognizes that the formation of meaningful, ethical relationships is a vital foundation for authentic leading in an education world that is constantly changing.





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The community I was privileged to be part of taught me that the ‘chameleon way’ frees one from the restrictions and limitations of a position and enables transparency, creativity and authenticity as one navigates through the rough seas of leading and teaching.

My children Anna, Paul, Ben, Jakob and Esther are the reason I began the journey up a country road. Over the years that followed they supported me, believed in me, kept me grounded and brought me back home each evening. The community embraced them as their own children and watched them grow into adulthood. They were and are, the constant in my life – my reason to be. Watching them as they live their lives convinces me that being true to self and searching for authentic relationships are the essential ingredients in finding harmony in life.

Colin walked much of the journey with me. He understood my world and supported me in it. He taught me much about the ‘chameleon way’ before I had given it definition. He brought to life many of my dreams and those of the community. For this, I will always be grateful.

Dianne, my professional colleague, my mentor, my confidante and my dear friend believed in me and in my work. As she shared her time and work with the community, they came to know, love and trust her. She was the pulse between my head and my heart. With her constant guidance and trust, I was able to work my way through system expectations and the day-to-day reality for the community. She remains my ‘light’ when leading seems too heavy.



Fr Madden was my sage figure – a man of wisdom and understanding. He supported me in the building of community, in the welcoming of the ‘oldies’ to the life of the school and in ensuring that compassion was the cornerstone in decision-making. He particularly watched over me as I grew in my own inner wisdom.

Julsie, the grand-mother of the community, held in her memory and her heart the precious stories of the community’s past, the joys and anguish of its present and the hopes, longings and dreams of its future. She was my rock, my constant companion on the journey and the inspiration in my work. She continues to watch over the community of children that I have now left and over me as I go on my way.

I honour all the beloved voices in the study: the voices of the ‘oldies’, many that are now silent, the voices of the young who captivated me and held me to them, and all the voices of the community who dreamed dreams with me. They all enabled me to weave the distracted, disconnected and disjointed threads of life together to create a meaningful, vibrant tapestry that I will continue to work with for the remainder of my life.

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## **PREAMBLE**

### **Making sense of the story**

Ever since I was a young child, I have seen teaching as my life path. I vividly remember spending summer holidays on the front verandah of my home, with a small chalkboard constructed by my father, all my dolls and teddy bears lined up in rows, my pet cockatoo perched on the back of a kitchen chair, family cat lazing on the ground and the farm dogs just sitting around in interest. I had a cane that I used to herd the cows into their stalls with. I would use this to prod the dolls and teddies whenever there was a need, and sometimes the cockatoo would be given a sharp poke because it provided the scene with vocals when nudged. I, the six year old, had become the teacher.

This life-path remained in my psyche all through my schooling until I ventured forth into a bigger world when I was sixteen. I, the youngest member of my generation on both sides of my family, was the first to move from the shelter of home and family for a tertiary education. I attended Teachers' College to gain the education and training to fulfil my life's dream.

Following this time, I taught for over two decades, in many different school settings, working to ensure the needs of the children were met. I was passionate about the children I taught, their families and the teaching and learning practices that were required. My world was simple, uncomplicated. I saw teaching as a way of life rather than a career path. It was what I had wanted to do since those early days on the front verandah.

My life as teacher, specifically in a rural school, began in 1995. I went to the school as teacher of the Junior School. Shortly after my arrival, a set of events meant that I became 'care-taker' of the school until a Principal could be found and appointed for the following year.



Although only a short term position, I was called to question many areas of my life. I never considered leading a school and thinking beyond the confines of my classroom. My family was my life and I did not want to be taken away from what I saw as my reason to be. At that time, I was called to a new understanding of self. This marks the time when I began to take hold of my world and began a profound journey of self-realisation. It went beyond the confines of leading a school community, to a place where I was called to know myself, the leader, intimately, and to know the community I was leading in a very different way from what I had ever experienced or understood at any other time.

My story is given life in the rural, remote, isolated, disadvantaged community of a place I will call *Ferndale*. Although the story deals with a journey of searching out an understanding of leadership within this community, it tells the journey of my taking hold of my world and coming to a 'knowing of self' that has brought me to a place of inner wisdom of self and of the world of education. It has been a long, agonizing journey filled with disappointments, anguish, frustration, moments of immense jubilation, pride and feelings of privilege and honour to be working with children. The greatest learning has been that the journey is never-ending and that there is nowhere to arrive at.

I began the journey at a time when there were very few women leading schools. As the pages of this text explain, I fell into leadership by chance rather than by design. Although competent, articulate, physically and emotionally strong, I never considered leadership. My leading was within the home and it was there that I was content. After becoming a leader in the school, I knew I had much to learn. I found the learning a difficult task as the only avenue for me to learn was from within the classroom and from the children I was teaching.

I came into a school community where all the decision makers were men. Women had relevance in the raising of funds for the school and in the general tending to the day-to-day needs of the children. I was in a community where



the male gender was the dominant voice in all avenues of community life. Men were certainly seen and known as the leaders. I came to a belief in those days that male advantage was certainly heightened in rural areas. Female school leaders in the past were strong, tough characters that I had little in common with and certainly led their schools from a very different leading to my own. They were seen as 'one of the boys' and I didn't fit that label.

The research and literature that I read described the male Principal experience and I found this foreign from my own. I was left pondering my own leading, being authentic to myself as a woman, doing the leading in what seemed to be a man's domain. I easily related to Kenway's (1995) understanding of the dualities of masculinity and femininity:

...the hard, the dry and the strong: femininity with the soft, the wet and the weak. More particularly, masculinity mobilizes around physical strength, instrumental skills, public knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity, rationality and competition. In contrast, femininity is associated with physical weakness, expressive skills, private knowledge, creativity, emotion, subjectivity, irrationality and co-operation. These dualities are usually arranged in hierarchies of esteem with the male claiming the greatest merit. (p. 63)

The world I was operating in held the masculine perspective in high regard. My creativity, my emotion, my way of expressing myself, my collaborative style, even my irrationality had been highly regarded characteristics of myself as the teacher. But I found myself left undone in the world of principalship. Even the boys within the Ferndale school saw the female Principal as someone to be demeaned. They used their strength and aggression believing it would give them an advantage in the power stakes.



My leadership journey in Ferndale also saw me guiding my own four children through secondary school and then through tertiary education. In addition, it was at a time in my aged parents' lives when they themselves needed my care. During my ten years in Ferndale, I cared for my dad until his death and then my mum came into our home to be cared for until her death. These demands and the Principal-leading demands sometimes seemed to be all-consuming and all-encompassing, but I believe it was my ability to be strong, capable and unswerving that supported me. I learnt to protect myself through navigating a course through the demands of the school community, the town community, and the demands of family and friends. Sometimes I felt I was holding on for dear life rather than navigating. I acknowledge and make no apologies that my way of leading, my navigating, is from a nurturing, feminist place. I had no other way of operating so had to unravel within myself and within my role, my own way of doing things, my own way of being as Principal in Ferndale. It is who I was as myself, the leader.

I have used the 'chameleon' as a metaphorical way of expressing a concept of leadership that I came to know and feel comfortable with. The chameleon has great appeal to me. The word chameleon means 'Earth Lion' and is derived from the Greek word *chamai* (on the ground, on the earth) and *leon* (lion) ([www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chameleon](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chameleon)). Being grounded, real and honest within the work of leading has been a huge challenge for me and one that has called me to look at all aspects of my work life and my personal life. It called me to never lose sight of the eyes of the children with whom I worked in all the decisions I made and the hopes that I held for them.

Chameleons vary greatly. I gain energy from variety and difference. I welcome challenges coming from different mindsets and perspectives and the variety of the chameleon species is a great representation of this. (An aside in this preamble, that is only intended to add a little humour, is that the male chameleon is generally much more ornamented than the female.)



Chameleons' feet allow them to grip tightly to narrow branches. I believe this gripping tightly to something that is hard to hold onto is the way of the leader in schools of the twenty-first century. It is about knowing what is important to grip on to and what needs to be let go.

Chameleons have a full 360 degree arc of vision around their body. The chameleon leader has to have eyes in all directions. The leader needs to be on the lookout for the welfare of everyone as well as being very aware of new initiatives and challenges. When a chameleon locates its prey, both eyes can focus giving a sharp stereoscopic vision and depth of perception. The analogy of the chameleon and the leader is an accurate one as the leader must be astute, intuitive and sensitive in the role when dealing with children, their families and their community. There needs to be a raised sense of consciousness to the needs of the school community when dealing with outside agencies and in recent years when dealing with the outside pressures of the work. The leader needs to be able to decide what work must be done and what work must be left undone.

It is believed that the chameleon is deaf and communicates by vibrations. I smile in making a comparison here as I ponder the many times I hear stories of what I have said or done or am about to do. Many times I have heard stories about me that are filtered through people's perceptions or their own experiences. These stories are not based on fact, but are indeed the 'stuff' of life when dealing with people's lives, particularly in times of hardship or tension. I often have to be deaf to avoid inner hurt or tension that can tend to take away energy and cause negativity to enter my being. Dealing with vibrations connects to me as I know I have to be astute, wise, incisive and sharp in listening to what people are really saying. Hearing the vibrations of the children, the staff and the community is vital in the work of listening and leading.

Finally, the chameleon is known as an animal that changes its colours to suit its environment. Despite popular opinion this is a fallacy. Rather, the chameleon



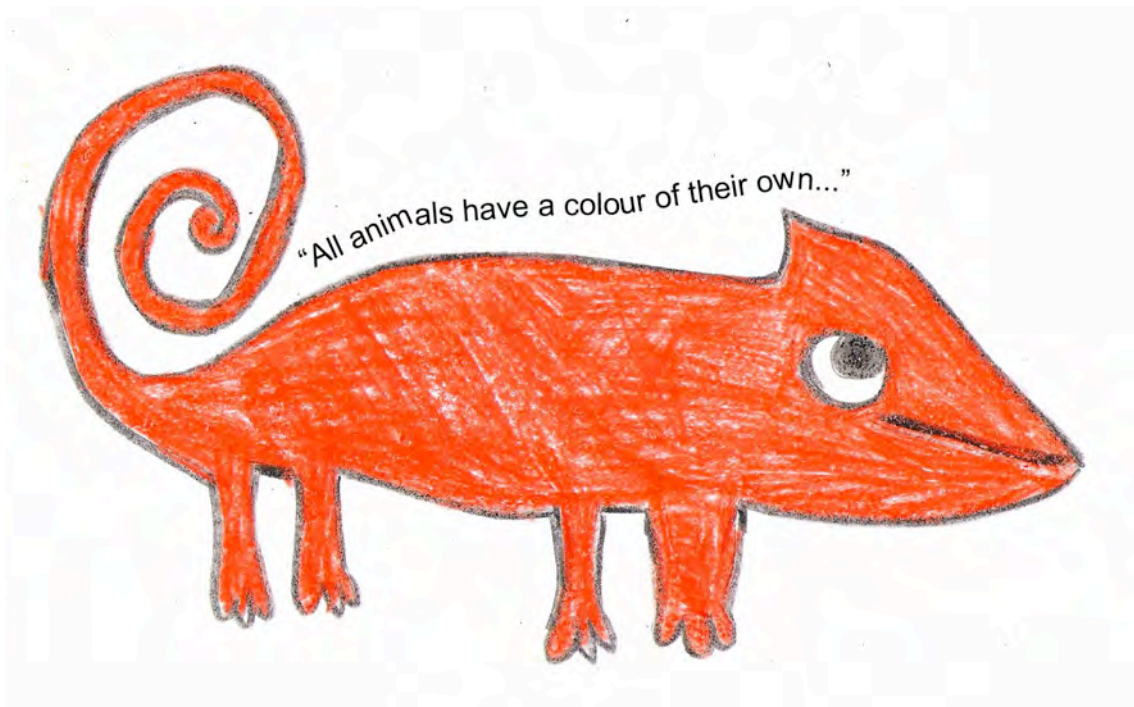
has a transparent outer skin that reflects light to its under layers of skin, causing the appearance of colour change. As leader, I know who I am in my core, but in the many moments of each day, I take on the appearance of many different roles, many colours reflecting the situation of the environment I am in. This is as relevant now as it was when I was Principal in Ferndale.

This autoethnography shows the many colours of the Principal as I lived for ten years in a community that taught me about myself as a person, as a leader, as a teacher of children, a confidante, a friend and a mentor of families and community. The ten years began in 1995 and continued until 2005, when I left Ferndale to take up another position as Principal. My 'research' did not begin in a formal way, given that I was not consciously undertaking a research study in the early years of my principalship at Ferndale. I have always kept a critical, reflective journal and maintained samples of varying artefacts of the community to help me understand and navigate my own way through what it meant to be a Principal in Ferndale. As I attempted to learn about leadership, I realised my struggle required more than my reflections and my community artefacts to support me in this reflection. I decided to begin a course in Educational Leadership which exposed me to the theories of leadership and grounded me in reflecting on my own experience of leading my school. This led me to 'research' my own lived experience and use this as a learning experience throughout my study – a place of reference for my understanding of theory and practice.





## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION



*When the people gathered around the fire telling the story of all that had happened, something new came to mind. "We have overcome the strength of Elephant and our fear of Shark and Hawk. We have done this by sitting by the fire and telling stories of what has happened to us and learning from them... we have the gift of story and the wisdom it brings. We do not need to be masters of the earth. We can share because it is wise to do so.' From this day on, the people never forgot to sit by the fire and tell their stories...never forgetting that in the stories could be found wisdom, and in wisdom, strength.*

-----African Folk Tale



## **Introduction**

This thesis is a narrative, telling an autoethnographic story, within the context of a primary rural school and the community that supports it. A concept of educational leadership is devised through the storying of life lived over a ten year period, the analysing of this storying, and reflecting on the experience.

## **Aim of the autoethnography**

My narrative research is the journey of one school community<sup>1</sup> as it strove, within a rapidly changing environment, to be a community where relationships were nurtured and challenged in the belief and the hope that these relationships would indeed transform the school community and the broader community. Working within this community over the past ten years, I struggled with what it was that made an authentic leader in a school setting – particularly the small, rural school setting I found myself within.

As I have found much left unsaid in the educational leadership theories of today, I aim to explore a reconceptualisation of educational leadership. It is intended that this exploration will be within the context of community, rather than looking towards and being influenced by the external management perspectives that have been prevalent in the 1990's. Being within community, I aim to explore my own lived experiences of leadership, having gained responses from students, staff, parents and community members regarding their own understandings and concepts of educational leadership. I aim to show that educational leadership cannot be seen as an isolated study, but needs to be encased within the notions of community, culture, change, teaching and learning and must also consider the aspect of the educational leader looking within the self to bring meaning to life experiences. I aim to reconceptualise leadership as I explore its reality through my own lens, the lens of the school community and the environment in which it was situated. It is intended that the insights and understandings I gain might ultimately contribute

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'community' embraces the rural school community which includes the students, parents, teachers, township community and the wider district in which the school exists.



to a reconceptualisation of educational leadership in the rural, Australian educational context and beyond.

### **Context of the autoethnography**

The context of the autoethnography was 'Ferndale,' a small country town, with a population of 503 people, located approximately 300 kilometres from its capital city and 30 kilometres from its nearest regional city.<sup>2</sup> In 1995 when I began to work at the school, 78% of the population was aged 15 and over, more than a quarter of the population was over 75 years of age, with more than 15% aged 80 and over. Forty-two percent of the population was not in the workforce. By 2005, the statistics were similar, the 'oldies' having died and have been 'replaced' by the next generation. The school I worked in was not only a small, rural school, but was considered remote, disadvantaged and isolated. Forty-six percent of enrolled families survived on government benefits.

The children of Ferndale Primary School community had been born into an environment that was part of the demise of small rural communities, within a climate of economic rationalism. This economic concept seemed to ignore, or had lost sight of, or never recognized, that the lives and spirits of human beings were impacted upon by the political decisions being made by those who had no understanding of the reality for this rural community. The community had been fighting for its very survival and in many instances, had stopped fighting. As a result, the children's world appeared to be in turmoil. Every day the children related to the townspeople who felt they had nothing to give to the world because their story was worthless. These children lived in a community where the problems of alcohol and drug dependence, youth suicide, dysfunction in families, long-term unemployment, the problems associated with aged loneliness and youth pregnancy were on the faces of the people they spoke to on their way to and from school each day.

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all people and places referred to in this narrative research.



Over ten years as Principal and teacher, I struggled with the reality of the problems in the lives of the students of Ferndale. I endeavoured to make sense of what a school should be, and appear to be, in the place.

Ferndale had an ageing population. The older people in the community looked to the school for their support because there were no support agencies within the town. As a result, the children became significant members of the senior Ferndale community and the school's culture was very reflective of a strong connection with this community. With support from the school staff, the students responded to the needs of the senior citizens, thereby strengthening the school community and the wider community. Hence, they provided a model of hope for all. In this context, I believed that a particular type of educational leadership was needed - one committed to learning and relating to others. I recognised that this leading was about forming intelligent people who could confront the problems around them, search out options and choose solutions for their situations.

The focus of this research narrative was an understanding of lived experiences – the stories lived by the people in the research.

### **Questions to be explored**

Throughout my time in this small school community, I found myself struggling with who an educational leader needed to be within this particular context. I aimed to search a concept of educational leadership that was authentic and relevant to the lives of the people within

- the immediate school community;
- the Ferndale community;
- the wider rural community; and
- my own life.

This research prompted me to ask many questions and address issues surrounding my situation. The following were crucial issues:



- the relational nature of educational leadership;
- the relationship between educational leadership and the quality of the teaching and learning within the school;
- the relationship between educational leadership and the creation of an adaptable community;
- the relationship between educational leadership and school culture; and
- the relationship between educational leadership and management.

**Major Questions:**

**Who was I as educational leader within the self?**

**Who was I as educational leader within the school?**

**Who was I as educational leader within the community?**

The answers to my research questions are not only found in theory, but have also been found in my personal journey, leading to my reconceptualisation of the notion of educational leadership and making some sense of what an effective learning community for the twenty-first century could look like. I recognise that findings will never be static, but ever-changing and evolving.

**Significance of the autoethnography**

Educational leadership theory and practice in the 1990s have been influenced strongly by management practices. These have been tied closely to organizational theories that require power and managerial skills for their legitimacy. Hence, business terminology of accountability, client service, task specification, role specification, productivity and output have become part of the language that has crept into the educational vernacular of today. I am not arguing that educational organizations must be accountable for their efficiency and effectiveness, but wish to add to the body of writing which believes that within the school context, leadership must be lived within “a culture of love, [that] is people orientated; built on relationships; based on hope; and based on service” (McGettrick, 1995, p. 6).



At a time when there is much concern regarding the lack of sustainability of educational leadership positions within schools, this narrative research may provide insights for educational authorities on the multi-faceted role of educational leadership within schools and hopefully give insight into a model of educational leadership that is life-giving for the educational leader and the community.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided a general introduction to my research and placed it in the particular context of a rural school and its community. It has defined the purpose of my research as an exploration of my own experiences of leadership in the context of a rural community. This context provides insights into the role of principal leadership that I believe can be applied to any leadership context. It has posed the major questions to be investigated through the ethnographic eye of the principal.

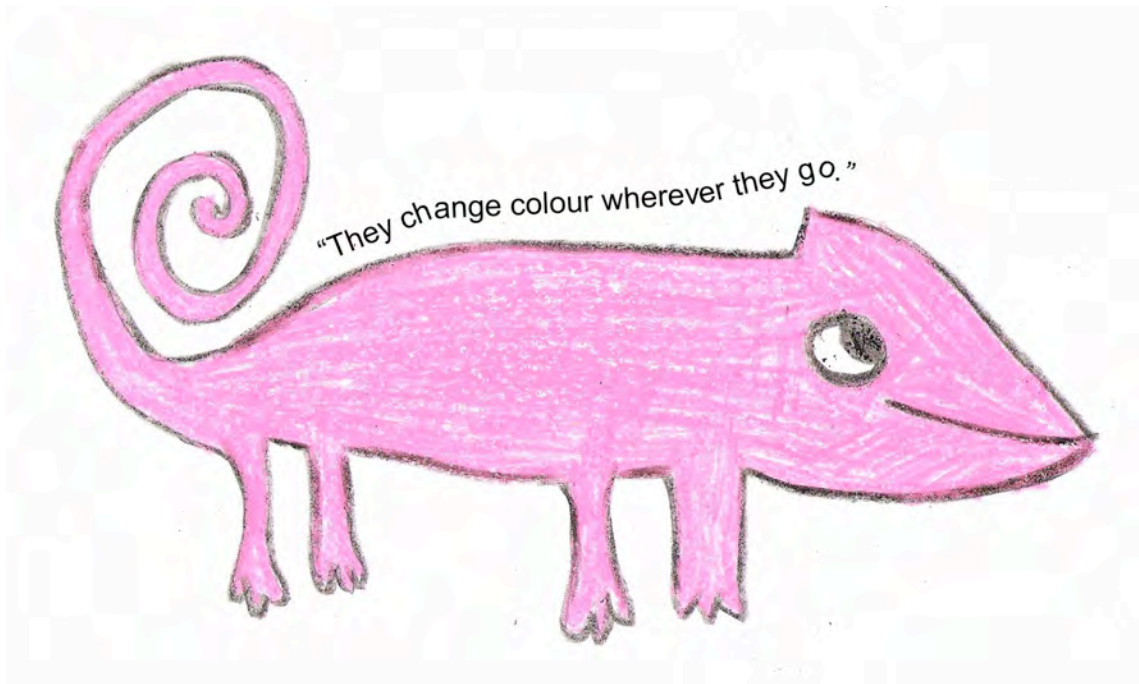
### **The story continues...**

The next chapter provides a review of relevant literature pertaining to educational leadership; specifically leadership from within, from the perspective of teacher/leader, leading within community and within an environment of change.



## CHAPTER 2.

### THE VOICE OF LITERATURE



*...the vision of education that we long for is the possibility to create whole, healthy communities...communities that liberate the genius and goodness of all children for the world, and that invite and inspire the power and creativity of the human spirit. It is our work to create a generative paradigm of learning that invites not only the fullness of our intellect, but the fullness of our imagination, the fullness of our emotions, and the fullness of our spirit.*

\_\_\_Stephanie Marshall, 1998



## **Introduction**

This chapter will review the literature pertaining to educational leadership. My review begins by looking at literature concerned with perspectives of this leadership and then reviews four key issues that I believe have been significant in leading a rural community and in considering the concept of educational leadership. These issues are:

- leadership from within;
- leadership and teaching;
- leadership and community; and
- leadership and change.

Following chapters will draw extensively on literature pertaining to the leader relating to the self and to literature related to aspects of teaching, community and change.

## **Leadership perspectives**

There are many perspectives that appear in the literature on leadership. My particular focus is on leadership in a small rural school. One of the early and influential researchers is Greenleaf. Greenleaf (1977), a life-long student of how things got done within the organisations he worked in, focused on “building a better, more caring society” (p. 3). He believed that great leaders must first serve others. Spears (1995) takes this up by suggesting that “True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a desire to help others” (p. 3). Spears (1995) has built on Greenleaf’s model of serving others by emphasising “increased service to others, a wholistic approach to work, a sense of community and shared decision-making power” (p. 4).

During the ten years of my time in Ferndale, I have worked to empower the community. Sergiovanni (1992) states that “...the leadership that counts is the kind that touches people differently. It taps their emotions, appeals to their values and responds to their connections with other people” (p.120). I needed the community members to believe that they were authentic partners with each other and myself in their own life-education. I agreed with Spears’ notion that if





“other people’s highest priority needs are being served then there would be obvious signs of collegiality, power sharing, listening, appreciating and encouragement” (Spears, 1995, p. 4). I was constantly made aware of the “delicate balance between conceptualization and day to day focus” within my community (Spears, 1995, p. 6). I was called to be authentic in every interaction, never forgetting that the intrinsic and extrinsic purpose of the school is for children to learn. I needed to continually challenge myself to evaluate how people were listened to, understood and accepted within the school. This evaluation was in the form of listening to the community’s stories and, in learning to understand what was being said in the experience of the story. It concerned itself with treasuring the sacredness of the ‘other’, as Spears (1995) would have it, making “a deep commitment to listening intently to others” (p. 4).

This brings me to question the kind of leadership that is needed to ensure schools exist in the twenty-first century within an ever-changing society. There is a need, as Sarros & Butchatsky (1996) suggest, for a committed leadership where there is “willingness and commitment to building learning organizations” (p. 280). My story in the Ferndale community has underscored the validity of the words of Sarros & Butchatsky. I came to the realisation that my commitment to being involved in the day to day lives of those within the community was the core to their belief in me as an authentic person and to their belief in my vision of a learning community. I also understood that the Ferndale community was experiencing change at a rapid rate and that I needed to understand the change taking place and have “the ability to work with change” (McGilp, 1998, p.1). In her research McGilp (1998) explores the vast array of leadership styles and makes the distinction between leaders and managers. I found it vital to make this distinction in my work. The leader in the Information Age does not own the power of the leadership position but “willingly distributes the power to all levels of the company” (Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996, p. 283). Power is a word I shy away from in my thinking about leadership but, in this context, it represents how, and in what way, power is moved from one of authority to a shared one of understanding and commitment.



Stoll and Fink (1996) propose that the changing and unstable social forces, which are shaping education, need a leadership style very different from those of the past. They propose invitational leaders as being more inclusive and concerned with moral purpose. A depth of understanding of people, together with demonstrated professionalism is at the heart of their invitational leadership. I suggest, however, that Bhindi and Duignan's (1997) writings about authentic leadership add a new dimension to the leadership literature. Their writing certainly has aspects of invitational leadership but proposes the building of

...meaningful and significant relationships within organizational structures and processes that support core significant values, [captures the] intellects, hearts and souls into shaping a vision for the future [and seeks the] rediscovery of the spirit within each person and a celebration of their shared meaning and purpose of relationships [and an understanding of the] feelings and aspirations and needs of others. (p.199)

This relational style is directly opposed to the corporate, managerial style of leadership that I know was foreign to my small school context but which is continuing to creep through the doors and into the hallways of schools and institutions of learning. It is this relational style that captures the essence of the learning community I was part of during my ten years tenure as Principal.

### **Leadership from within**

Berquist (1998) calls for the leader to have a strong sense of the inner self within an outer structure of a supporting community built on trust and hope. He calls for leaders to be observant of the

...sacred nature of human organizations as only in this way can we successfully tend the complex irreversible fires of the post modern world...We've invested so much time and energy in learning to do the right things, we suddenly see that they are no longer serving us



well. They seem hollow. We stare into the darkness of our inner territory and begin to wonder what lies inside. (p.13)

Kouzes (1999a) calls this inner territory the 'guts,' or as I see it, the passions, the hopes, the inner working of the person, the essence. This thought creates energy within me because this is about knowing oneself and longing to know another. Lopez (1995) also deals with this aspect of leadership. He believes the leader of the community must have an inner knowledge of self and really know what leadership is about. "Starting inside myself requires a great deal of commitment on [my] part" (Lopez, 1995, p.155). This requires a consistent commitment, valuing who I am and becoming worthy of the trust of others. The traditional mechanistic model of leadership no longer works in a world of change. It certainly would not work for me. Smith (1995) writes about the emerging model which "calls for an examination of our deepest beliefs" (p. 212). He, like Kouzes, is dealing with the inner life of the leader where we are "called to examine ourselves individually and in relation to others" (Smith, 1995, p. 216).

While I want to delve into Smith's (1995) challenge of "taking the risk to develop [my] own map" (p. 17), I believe this can only be done in relationships and I know the challenge for me is to find answers to the questions that Greenleaf (1977) posed. "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (pp.13-14). The answers to these questions are in the stories told by the Ferndale community. Finding answers to these questions has been vital for me, as I believed the concept of service was the core to helping the children I taught and the community I worked within. Kouzes (1999) claims that "The core to becoming an authentic leader is the need to always connect one's voice to one's heart" (p. 39). Only with this connection was I real for myself and for those who worked with me each day.



Sergiovanni's (1996) servant leadership concept is closely linked to the development of trust. He believes the person who truly serves earns justifiable trust, and that trust given and received creates the climate for service at the deepest level. My experience of life and work in the Ferndale community was one of being part of the building of the kind of climate to which Sergiovanni (1996) refers. Koch (1999) used different words, but I believe he was speaking of the kind of trust Sergiovanni wrote about. He called for "straight dealings" and "unimpaired credibility" (p. 95). In our educational setting, the understanding of the concept of service as the development of strong, ethical relationships between all members of the learning community "calls for a grounding in a new foundation, the foundation of relationships rather than things" (Lepani, 1999, p.10). This, aligned with Greenleaf's belief in creating relationships of respect and dignity, was the model I used to understand and relate to. Duignan (1997) closely aligned himself with Sergiovanni and his concept of "the passionate dance of relationships" (p. 4). He wrote that "individuals and groups should experience a sense of deep and enduring meaning and significance from an appreciation of their interconnectedness and interdependency and from a sense of their connectedness to something greater than the self" (Duignan, 1997, p. 24). Although Duignan's intention was not to define community when he wrote these words, I find no better definition.

Kouzes also writes about voice. The "core of becoming a leader is the need always to connect one's voice to one's touch" (Kouzes, 1999, p. 39). These words forced me to ask myself:

- Who was it that was speaking?
- Who was it that went to work each day?
- What was I working for?
- What was it that I really cared about?
- Who were the people who were important in my life?

So, leadership has much to do with an authentic appraisal of oneself as a leader and a prioritising of what issues are vital within the leadership



perspective. This appraisal, this inner reflection, is constant, ever-changing in direction and ever-evolving in its focus. Perhaps this is what Duignan (1997) was referring to in his calling leaders to “connect with the heart, the spirit and the soul in order to give meaning to our existence and place life and work in perspective” (p. 22). Working towards understanding these words has caused me much anguish over many years as I tried to fathom their meaning and their relevance in my own life. I tried to separate a professional life from a personal one and agonised over time allocation and priorities. My journey led me to perhaps understand Duignan’s words – the connection of heart, spirit and soul and meshing life in its entirety. Kouzes (1999) sums up this connection as a call to knowing oneself first and foremost before being for the ‘other’ or a community. “What earns you their respect in the end is whether you are what you say you are, and whether what you are embodies what they want to become. So who are you anyway?” (p. 42).

### **Leadership and teaching**

Within a setting of change, sometimes chaos, effective teachers of the future (and hopefully the present) can work with uncertainty, and need to have the ability and the confidence to think completely differently about the life of the school. As Stacey (1996) writes, “Mess is the material from which life and creativity are built, not according to some prior design, but through a process of self-organisation that produces emergent outcomes” (p.12). This mess that is referred to is the stuff of life – the stories from which experiences are told, reflected upon and from which new stories evolve. I believe educators need to value story, need to be inspired by complexity of story within their own lives and their school lives. I concur with Stacey (1996) that education must be able to “operate right on the edge of system disintegration, in a kind of phrase transition between a stable zone of operation and an unstable or disordered regime” (p.12).

According to Anderson (1992), everyday events like “making another person feel good in the unspectacular course of his (sic) daily comings and goings, is



the very essence of leadership” (p. 77). It is the relational nature of leadership that creates the moments of learning and living. As leader, I have come to understand the potential within the ‘follower.’ As leader I must understand that followers are not, as I see, people who must take their direction from leaders who hold all the power.

They are, instead, the creators of energy. They are the architects of the open moments into which some people must be the first to step...they are the agents who show their leaders where to walk. They are the ones who validate their leaders stepping out in a direction that has meaning for us all. (Foster, 1989, p. 60)

Educationalists are the people who know their craft – who know their students. They must be at the forefront of educational ideas, questioning, challenging, proposing more astute ways of thinking and doing for students. As Sungaila (1992) writes:

The quality of teaching and learning in an educational system can only be improved from within the system, from within the classroom, from within the heart and mind of the teacher who is determined to teach so that the students do learn all that they possibly can. (p. 87)

Senge believes that learning comes from bringing thinking and doing together. He believes that learning is the vehicle to understanding self. “Through learning we become able to do something we were never able to do... we perceive the world and our relationship to it” (Senge, as cited in Binney & Williams, 1997, p.139). This thought is very much aligned with my own understanding of wisdom. The wise educator is needed in the educational climate of today – the wisdom to know one’s students and to build a relevant educational climate for them. I welcome Duignan’s (1997) call to “connect with the heart, the spirit and the soul in order to give meaning to our existence and place life and work in perspective” (p. 22). My story of the Ferndale community was a search for perspective in the school environment, the local community in which it existed, and within my own personal and professional life.



Despite the current emergence of a belief in school organisations becoming wholistic in their philosophy of teaching and learning, O'Neill (1995) questions schools as learning organisations and believes that "there's very little sense of collective learning going on in most schools" (p. 61). My own thoughts about present day schools resonate with these words. Classrooms must attempt to meet the needs of the students in a rapidly changing world. Many educators have taken on new educational thoughts and practices but have not aligned these with the lives of students they are teaching. Somehow the 'soul' of the student can be overlooked in theory and practice, and the basic skills demanded by the new century are lost.

Although written for a very different time, I believe a letter written in 1896 by the Catholic Bishops of Australia to their clergy is still very relevant in understanding the relational type of teaching and learning that is needed in today's educational climate:

...the personal belief and character of the teacher influences the efficiency and significance of his (sic) teaching in the souls of the children with whom he (sic) is in daily contact; that he (sic) is not simply a mechanical contrivance for pouring out a stream of knowledge, nor the children mere vessels for containing...what really takes place is the action of one soul upon another, action by sympathy and mutual insight, as well as, or rather, more than by verbal communication...the effect...is far beyond the power of formal instruction, it is a living product of life and association. (Moran, 1896, p. 776)

These words capture the essence of what is important in education - the relational nature of teaching. They state what many of today's writers are saying about effective teaching. The relationship 'of one soul upon another' speaks of relationship building if teaching is to be meaningful and significant. This surely applies in creating a concept of leadership for



schools – a concept of knowing the story, of knowing the lives of those within the school community.

### **Leadership within community**

I aligned the Ferndale community with the community that Sergiovanni (1996) defines as a “collection of people bonded together by mutual commitments and special relationships, who together are bound to a set of shared ideas and values that they believe in, and feel compelled to follow” (p. 100). The developing commitment that the Ferndale community had to its children and to the school community, created a bond and helped create meaningful relationships that supported the building of community – the culture of the community.

“The culture is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act” (Barth, 2001, p. 8). Culture, the way people live out their lives, the way ‘things are done around here,’ provides meaning to community and provides a stability and ownership and a certainty. “To change the culture requires that we be first aware of the culture, the way things are done around here. This means crafting and using wide-angle, microscopic and telescopic lenses, and honing our skills of observing” (Barth, 2001, p. 8). I found it vital that I was sensitive, astute and patient as I became ‘soaked’ in the community. Ultimately, I felt I knew the community. Sergiovanni (2000) uses the apt metaphor of ‘glue’ when he defines culture. He recognises it as “the normative glue that holds a particular school together. With shared visions, values and beliefs at its heart, culture serves as a compass setting, steering people in a common direction” (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 1). Schien (1985) saw culture as “the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organisation’s view of itself and its environment” (p. 6).





When I first arrived in the Ferndale community, I realised that there was no shared purpose other than that the school was where the children went to receive an education. There was no ownership of the school and there was nothing that “connected parents, teachers and students morally to each other and to their responsibilities as defined by shared purposes” (Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 83). I felt that somehow a vision had to be realised and shared in order to have an effect on creating a different kind of life for the school community. Covey (1994) certainly understands the power of a shared vision. It “creates a synergistic empowerment. It unleashes and combines the energy, talent and capacities of all involved” (p. 219). I came to know this kind of energy but only after much time had been spent in learning about and with my community. Time became the vehicle through which trust emerged as the community “formed a vision of the future state [they] desired to achieve, persuaded others to believe [and then] realised it” (Ormell, 1996, p. 29). O’Neill’s (1999) words resonate with my understanding of this shared kind of vision and is reiterated with Ormell’s words; the “lens through which we see and engage in the world. It is the great rallying call that captures our most fundamental beliefs and defines who we are and what we stand for” (p. 8).

Stoll and Fink (1996) relate the culture of a school to the type of students it produces. It influences students’ morale and self-concept and creates “active involvement and responsibility on the part of the students” (p.16). This is a representation of ownership where the students are part of the creation of culture, where they feel they belong to it and it belongs to them. As previously noted, culture is not static but ever-evolving.

### **Leadership and change**

The Ferndale community was involved in a process of change that was all involving and all evolving. The small community struggled to survive as a community with purpose, honour and worth. The community experienced the “emerging social reality in which the only certainty is uncertainty” (Mackay, 1997, p.180). Certainty had ended, and with this ending many within our



schools were applying their old thought processes and ways of doing to new ways of thinking and doing and the result was that “the vast majority of change efforts are misconceived because they fail to understand and harness the combined forces of moral purpose and skilled change agency” (Fullan, 1993, p. 42). I came to understand that schools of the twenty-first century could quickly become far removed from learning organizations for their time, and become places of fragmentation and misunderstanding of the need for change for a new generation – for new communities. Change in this context creates tension, work overload and lack of creativity. Brahm’s (1995) message of change is “one of working with creative tension which lies between a current reality and the vision” (p. 77). Within these words I found a powerful voice that was attuned to the Ferndale community’s reality, but it had a vision of where to travel with the community. Lee (1997) writes that “only visionary breakthrough leaders will have the capacity to lead their organisation into the revolutionary change even if it means the first major social impact of the hyper-learning revolution will be to make schooling obsolete as we know it now” (p. 4).

Change is not comfortable or easily attended to. Within the educational context, it is not about a “dent made to the structure that will invariably be rectified after the change makers depart the scene” (Lee, 1997, p. 4). At the same time, educationalists have been “tinkering at the edges while the underlying factory model of schooling remains untouched” (Lee, 1997, p. 5). Within a world of constant change, upheavals and uncertainty, places of learning need to play at least two major roles: “...safeguard the cultural heritage and identity of their people [and] train the people to be able to compete in the global economy” (Zadja, 1997, p. 27). Authentic leaders who nurture, inspire and empower others are needed to restore human, ethical and spiritual dimensions to organisational relationships. The leader of the school must have the passion and the belief in knowing that, out of what can be seen like chaos or no apparent order, there is the capacity to “produce...creative new outcomes that none of us ever dreamed of” (Stacey, 1996, p.13). This brings me to question the kind of leadership that I believe is needed to ensure schools exist



within an ever-changing society. Sarros & Butchatsky (1996) have also noted that “One of the key ingredients of breakthrough leaders is their willingness and commitment to building learning organizations” (p. 280).

The leader in the Information Age does not own the power of the leadership position, but “willingly distributes the power to all levels of the [institution]” (Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996, p. 283). While Bhindi and Duignan’s (1997) authentic leadership perspective has aspects of Stoll and Fink’s (1996) invitational leadership, it also involves building “meaningful and significant relationships within organizational structures and processes that support core significant values” (p. 199). This notion captures the “...intellects, hearts and souls into shaping a vision for the future [and seeks the] rediscovery of the spirit within each person and a celebration of their shared meaning and purpose of relationships [and an understanding of the] feelings and aspirations and needs of others” (p. 199). While I acknowledge these perspectives of educational leadership, they fell short in my search for the type of leader needed in my work in the community of Ferndale.

### **Summary**

I began to experience and understand leadership differently from contemporary views in the literature on the topic. My on-going attempts at reconceptualizing leadership come about through my experiences, my interactions with my community, responses from members of the community, and my own reflections, together with an analysis of all these.

I have found that contemporary theories of leadership are left wanting when aligned to my experience of leadership in my rural school community, as I have worked to reconceptualise the notion of leadership. Although they identify vital aspects of educational leadership and reflect the complex role of leadership for the new millennium, the rural school context provided a particular kind of context in which leadership needed to be lived out. I have found that educational leadership theory is centred within the school context, but the rural



school context demanded leadership both within and without the school context. It is from this perspective that leadership needed to be reconceptualized. While valuable and certainly able to be built on, contemporary theories have not addressed many of the issues I have been facing. The issues are:

- leading a school from within a classroom - what this meant for the school community;
- the leader being led and guided by the community's story;
- sharing leadership with the community;
- students leading their community;
- leading in isolation from peers; and
- the personal life of the leader in an isolated community.

### **The story continues...**

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology approach I am using. Being positioned as autoethnographer over a ten year period, I was well-placed to gain insights and understandings into the school and town community of Ferndale. The chapter explores my autoethnographic journey to make sense of my time in the community by using my journal to record my experiences and interactions, reflecting on these, gathering the community's stories and analysing them through a multi-storied approach to find meaning.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH FRAMEWORK



*Back and forth ethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self.*

-----*Ellis & Bochner, 2000*



## **Introduction**

This chapter explains how a narrative autoethnography was considered an authentic, ethical way of going about my research. It briefly describes the theoretical framework adopted and the narrative nature of the research. It explores the collection of data over years of personal encounters and community happenings. Finally, it addresses issues of validity and ethics and recognizes the limits of the research.

## **Theoretical framework**

My research has taken the form of a narrative autoethnography. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) would have it:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth ethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 739)

My work was aligned with Ellis and Bochner's definition in that I found myself in the midst of people's lives, in the midst of their stories. I had not sought out the community of Ferndale for the purpose of a research project, but the research came out of the experience of living and working within the community. I came to the community as its teacher and eventually became its Principal. I brought my own life story to the Ferndale community and became a participant with them in their story. Anthropologists argue that if one is really to understand a group of people, one must engage in a period of observation...which involves immersion in a culture over a period of years, based on learning the language and participating in social events, with the people of the culture. So I considered myself well-positioned as autoethnographer in a community over a ten year period of life. My prolonged immersion in the life of the Ferndale community



helped me to rely on my knowledge and relationship with the community as the starting point or foundation on which to build my research.

I held the belief that, through a prolonged interaction with a group of people in their everyday lives, as autoethnographer, I was better able to understand beliefs, motivations and behaviours than by using any other approach. I also clearly understood the experience of Elwin (1964) who wrote that the “knowledge of the people gradually sank in until it was part of me” (p.142).

### **Research approach**

Narrative research “is about the collection, reading and writing of stories. Narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors. It is the primary way through which humans organise their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes” (Richardson, 1997, p. 27). Through the narrative style, I intended making the actions and thoughts of ‘human actors’ understood and explainable.

Narrative research is a crucial part of the autoethnographic approach. Ellis (2004) introduced me to the term “reflexive” when referring to narrative ethnography. “This approach offers insight into how the researcher changed as a result of observing others...the I is discovered in the Thou” (p. 46). The narrative research approach gave me the opportunity to hear and tell the stories that were precious in people’s lives, to “participate in the narratives of the culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationship with each other” (Richardson, 1997, p. 24). These stories were not treated as true accounts of reality but rather plausible accounts of how people view their world at a given time. These stories added meaning and worth to lives and guided my leading within the community. It was vital that I viewed the world through the perspective of the community in which the story was being lived and told.



The literature I have reviewed has been included in a separate chapter as well as being integrated into the text when relevant. Framing the stories within an analysis of relevant literature was intended to bring a richness of information and awareness to the social happenings of life within the community and supported me to engage in a scholarly reflection of the life lived. Telling stories alongside academic literature and theory provided me with the opportunity to find meaning through reflective discussions.

I have made myself visible in the research. I believed that the Ferndale community could be given a voice through my research. I have been a tangible presence within the research as I was not an outsider gathering data on a group of people. Those researched were 'my people.' I understood that my 'vulnerable' self would be exposed as I was emotionally as well as professionally aligned with the community within the study. I had to write from this perspective as this type of research "works to find the stories that people tell about their lives, claiming that humans are essentially storied beings, who understand and make their identities and lives through stories" (Thomson, 1999, p. 42). I also have included the stories told by people as well as my own stories as they appeared in my journal and in my reflection. As such, I have written from the first person, and offer no apology for doing so. I found I simply could not separate myself from who I was, and the people and place I found myself in.

### **Methodology**

I chose to do qualitative research, often described as interpretative research. Qualitative research emphasises "getting close to those we study, attempting to see the world through the participants' eyes and conveying the experience in a way faithful to their everyday life" (Ellis, 2004, p. 25). I positioned myself as autoethnographer within the study. Stories gained were woven together to create a narrative of the community which created a set of understandings and aspects of the world that needed to be told. This narrative involved

- the way things were done around the place;
- the way people related to each other;





- the traditions and rituals of the community;
- the symbols that had meaning within the community;
- the values and beliefs that were held dear in people's lives; and
- the close connection between the school and the community, particularly between the senior citizens of the school community.

In the analysis of my research, I used the frameworks suggested by Grant (1997). Her 'multi-storied approach' is presented as "three dimensional, with three interpenetrating layers or levels of storying, which...correspond to the personal, social and culturally contested dimensions of life, interpretation and explanation" (p. 33). Grant (1997) suggests that her use of three broad analytical approaches "foreground and acknowledge the personal/social/and cultural storying, in the construction of meaning" (p. 33). In order for there to be sound analysis and interpretation of stories, she claims that the three dimensions must be "understood relationally, in connection with, and as contextually part of each other" (p. 34). I share her contention that "it is important to give each dimension due attention and that doing so necessitates recognition of their essential interdependence" (p. 34).

Grant (1997) proposes three different frameworks in order to explain the interdependence of these dimensions: life as narrative, literacy as critical social practice and a critical analysis of language and discourse. The first develops the narrative perspective and moves beyond a person-centred focus to "encompass the socially diverse and the culturally contested and dominant narratives" (p. 34). The second is a theoretical perspective on literacy as critical social practice. This preserves an understanding of literacy-related events, identities and acts, together with social practices and processes, and critical ideological and cultural dimensions. The third framework, language as social discourse, spans the interrelationship between "...a micro focus on textual practices characteristic of much linguistic analysis, a mid-range focus as in studies of discursive practices and types, and the macro focus on dominant



social discourses, contested ideologies, competing and changing world views” (Grant, 1997, p. 34).

Hence, through these broad analytical approaches, it has been possible for me to recognise the personal/social/cultural storying of my community, and search and find meaning. In order for a valid, sound interpretation and analysis to occur, Grant’s three dimensions needed to be understood in connection with, and as contextually part of, each other. Grant contends that a focus on a single dimension remains one dimensional “unless we can hold in mind, and in tension, the co-existence and interaction of the other two planes, or frames” (p. 34). This multi-dimensional approach to analysis enabled me to give credibility to the stories told from lived experience while enabling me to interpret meaning, being mindful of the co-existence and interaction of the social construction of the literate subject within multiple and competing language and discourse practices.

### **Data collection**

Over the years, my own journal reflections detailed the happenings within the community, my encounters with personalities, and also my own emotional point of view about happenings and personalities. These have been used by me to reflect on my own practice, and have been a place for me to distance myself from happenings of the day. These journal reflections have allowed me to revisit episodes and critically analyse, remember, or just leave the accounts untouched forever. These reflections provided me with powerful field-notes about my life in this community, about the lives of those within the community, and about the events that took place that had some meaning in their lives and in my own. They provided me with a record of the thoughts that formed part of my own reflections. They told the story over time and revealed my own actions, feelings and thinking processes as well as providing valuable information about the context, politics and people who impacted on my life. As I read over these journal reflections, I found myself being a spectator of my own stories. This allowed me to stand back a little from the life lived and allowed me to be an analyst of my own data. I intended these field-notes to be used in the research



to give understanding to the lives of the people in the community and to position them in their own setting, with its history, hopes, dreams and unique feelings.

My writing reflects a long-term, established relationship with those in the research. This being my perspective, I felt comfortable with rejecting the notion of the research interview. Rather, I engaged in open-ended dialogues where my focus was on understanding the life experiences of the people, a “methodology for listening [and] seeing the world from the perspective of the subjects” (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, p. 37). I held a belief that, within these conversations, I would find a variety of on-going themes running through, which would be vital and relevant in my search for reconceptualizing leadership. By engaging in conversations with people of different ages, I am confident that I gained a better understanding of the past, present and future realities and dreams of a community. The data that I have gathered from my dialogue with community members have not been treated as ‘true accounts of reality’ but rather plausible accounts of how people viewed their world at a given time. I treated the responses as culturally defined narratives that were possibly factual.

### **Participants**

The word ‘participants’ was not seen as accurate for the purposes of my research, as ‘participants’ holds a particular view of people choosing to be part of a study. They are not ‘participants’ in the ‘true’ sense that appears in research literature. The people involved in this research participated by going about their ordinary lives within their community, with no agenda other than that. They came from all avenues of the community as follows:

- Students of Ferndale School provided stories that were representative of the myriad of stories within the school population. Some students began in the Preparatory class (aged five years), when I first arrived at the school, and remained at the school for the next 7 years. Some came from very deprived backgrounds while others were from well-respected farming families in the district. The



experiences of some represented the pain and emptiness in the lives of many of the students.

- Parents provided insights into the life of the school from another perspective. They reflected the hopes and dreams within the parent body for their children's futures. Other insights indicated the battles some parents had eg, substance abuse.
- School staff brought a history or a journey to the story and gave me a much-needed perspective of school life in the community over a period of time. One staff member was able to bring her journey of over twenty years to this new picture.
- Senior citizens<sup>3</sup> came from very different perspectives of life when telling their individual stories, and these different perspectives were representative of the history of the community – the history that formed the community's values, its fears and hopes.

It was vital that all their voices were heard in this research.

### **Limitations of the research**

Dey (1993) suggests that the context of one school community with its own unique set of economic, social and political circumstances raises the question of generalisability. The fact that this research was set in a particular place, in a particular time, certainly was the limitation of the study.

The fact that I have used written and oral data from real lives enables the analysis to be transferred to a broader socio-economic context. However, the presumptions of transferability and final conclusions are only tentative. I used data to construct meaning around the specific aspects of leadership that I was researching. The data selected were partial and subjective. They are coloured by the unique experiences of the lives within the research. Hence, it is not possible to be definitive in conclusions drawn from an analysis of the data, or to establish the external validity of conclusions reached.

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<sup>3</sup> The senior citizens were often called the 'oldies' by the children. This was used as a term of endearment and has been used throughout these pages with this understanding.



## Validity

Richardson (1997) alerted me to the many issues in writing my research:

- How could/should authorship be claimed?
- Where would validity/credibility/reliability fit?
- How would my writing reflect my social and authoritative privilege?
- What part of my story, my process, would be relevant to the text?
- How would I write myself into the text without being self-absorbed and unduly narcissistic?
- How could I write so that others' voices were not only heard but listened to?
- What consequences would my work have for the people within the research?
- What would be my ethical responsibilities? (p.106).

There was a concern that the alignment with those researched would bring into question the validity of my writing, as my own humanness and personality washed over the text. Within me, there was the struggle of doing research that was respectful to, and honoured, those being researched. Richardson captures something of my struggle when she writes:

A continual puzzle for me is how to do sociological research and how to write it so that the people who teach me about their lives are honoured and empowered, even if they and I see their worlds differently. (Richardson, 1997, p.18)

I was passionate about the people of Ferndale and I cannot, and will not, pretend I did not care about them. Much of the study was based on my own interpretation, but I believe my writing has been done with integrity, truth and commitment to the reality of the lives of the Ferndale community in the most authentic way I was able to do so. The story captured the everyday routines, demands, tensions and joys of the community, and my role as leader.



I believe my study is a valid extension of the current educational leadership literature. Although circumstances may be different, some of the tensions and the issues are universal within schools. The stories represent the micro interactions of a community. I believe that many of the issues and interactions that present themselves are pertinent to the role of any Principal in any context, not just to the role of a rural school Principal.

### **Ethical considerations**

As the nature of my research involved the private lives of people, I needed to be very honest and truthful documenting their stories. Mason (1996) writes about two problems where ethical issues impinge upon the qualitative researcher stating that “the rich and detailed character of much qualitative research can mean intimate engagement with the public and private lives of individuals” and that “the changing directions of interest and access during a qualitative study mean new and unexpected ethical dilemmas are likely to arise during the course of the research” (pp.166-167). I believe I gained a clear understanding of what Mason wrote about as my story unfolded and presented me with dilemmas that needed to be thought out and worked through as the research progressed.

The research has been conducted in accordance with the Australian Catholic University ethics requirements. Neither the school nor participants have been identified in the publication of research conclusions. Assurance has been given that there will be no disclosure that will identify anyone within the research.

### **Summary**

This is an autoethnographical research study, set in a small rural school, in a small rural town. Through the gathering of the community’s stories, analysing and interpreting them against the backdrop of current literature, it was intended to reconceptualise the notion of educational leadership. This notion of leadership is intended to be relevant and vital in the body of research pertaining to educational leadership, particularly leadership in the primary school context.



This reconceptualisation, based on life experiences, connects with the concerns and aspirations of leaders who invest their energies into the building of strong, ethical, learning communities.

**The story continues...**

In the next chapter, I explore the Principal as educational leader, recognizing that the building of meaningful, trusting relationships is vital if the leading is to be authentic and 'moral'. It firmly places the learning community within the wider community, not separate from it.



## CHAPTER 4

### TELLING THE STORY

#### PRINCIPAL AS EDUCATIONAL LEADER



*I began to realise that the bells and the confinement, the crazy sequences, the age segregation, the lack of privacy, the constant surveillance and all the rest of the national curriculum of schooling were designed exactly as if someone had set out to prevent children from learning how to think and act, to coax them to addiction and dependent behaviour.*

----- Gatto 1992, p. xii.





## **Introduction**

In this chapter, I recognise the reality for members of the Ferndale community and how this reality impacted on the children in the small, rural school. I intend to explore the notion that the building of meaningful relationships is the defining measure of the learning taking place. The journey explores the search for this essence in the teaching process, in order to ensure a compassionate learning community.

## **Context of the learning and teaching**

Ferndale school was in a remote community with an enrolment of 29 children in 1995. Many of the children came from homes that survived on government benefits and there was no incentive from within the community to change the way life was. For the children growing up in this community, life was very predictable: most would travel to secondary schools in a larger regional centre for a few years, and then return to Ferndale in the hope of work. Not much seemed to have changed in Ferndale over the years. Certainly, attitudes and expectations were similar to those of 50 years ago. However, the world beyond Ferndale had changed and its children had to be given skills, values and attitudes well beyond the experiences of the Ferndale community. The school was not very different from the school where the students' parents had been educated. Over the previous 25 years, the school had experienced a constant change of leadership. There had been 13 Principals, all with their own unique styles of leading. The metaphor of a life cycle for organisations suggests that "they evolve through a standardised sequence of transitions as they develop over time" and that "stages follow a consistent pattern and that the transitions from one stage to another are predictable rather than random occurrences" (Robbins & Barnwell, as cited in Spry, 1997, p.4). This was not the case for this small community, as it was at the whim of each Principal with his/her own philosophy of how to bring a good system of education to its children. There was no sign of a pattern and nothing was predictable.



At the time of my appointment as Principal to the community in 1995, there was much cynicism and scepticism about my presence and work within the school. Social, political and economic forces beyond the community were causing rapid change. The community was diminishing in number as the elderly died, and families and young people moved away for employment. The community was losing its identity as a rural community, as shops, banks, the hospital, and finally the Shire Offices were closed down. Within an environment of isolation, low socio-economic status, low self-esteem and unemployment, there was much brokenness and pain as the community came to the realisation that life had changed and with the change went much pride and hope.

As Principal and teacher in the town, I endeavoured to make sense of what school should look like. As stated earlier, in 1995 the community had a population of 503 people. It was considered a remote community as it was three hours from its capital city and half an hour from a regional centre. Of this population, many were elderly, and 42% percent not in the workforce. Within this context the small, rural school was remote, disadvantaged and isolated. It had a school population of 29 students, coming from 24 families. Forty-six percent of the enrolled families survived on government benefits. Many families had both parents in part-time work. A small percentage travelled to the nearest regional town for work, while six families survived totally on income derived from the land. Eleven families received the Education Maintenance Allowance, which was provided by the Government for low-socio-economic families. The school had two full-time teachers (including a teaching principal) and a part-time support teacher.

### **Committing to the community**

The everyday living out of life within the small community, and, more specifically, the small rural school community, created within me much passion and energy and became the engine for my work. I began my work by trying to understand what it meant to be a Principal in Ferndale – a Principal who wanted to serve the community and be a decisive practitioner. I was aware that I



needed to be committed to knowing the needs of the community so that I could be empowered to do the necessary work ahead.

Within this small community, I could see that the young were cherished. They carried the hopes of the community. Some of these hopes were expressed by a few of the 'oldies' who spoke their reality clearly.

The kids are all we've got left to show our lives have been worth something. There's nothing much to show for who we've been or for what we've done. It's all gone. It's all changed. There's nothing much to show we've lived... just our memories. The kids are our only hope. (Anna, 1998)

I look around the town and I am filled with my memories but there's not much left except some old bedraggled, rusty buildings to share my stories about. I feel old and sometimes wonder what it's all been about. If I didn't have the kids to talk to, I would have no one. (Arthur, 1999)

I carry my brother's picture with me all the time. He had it on him the day he was killed in the war. It's got a bullet hole through the middle of it. I showed it to the children at the school. On that day I felt he was right there beside me again because they were so interested in hearing my stories. Every time they see me they ask me how I'm going. They show me that they care about me. (Julia, 1998)

*Oral comments from senior citizens: 1998 & 1999.*

Implicit in these stories are the social attitudes towards the old in the general community of Ferndale. These people, aged between seventy to ninety years, felt a sense of worthlessness. It was the children who gave them a sense of belonging and hope that came with this belonging. Although a microcosm of



the general community, the school did not reflect the community's attitude of apathy. With a rebuilding of care for the elderly by the school, hope was eventually rekindled within the elderly. These people were given a 'home' at the school - a place to renew themselves and to believe in their own worth as citizens of the community they were now 'handing over' to the young. I had not, at that stage, encountered the concept of life-long learning and had no real thought processes in place regarding what a community of learners should look like, beyond a community of learners in a classroom or school. But I just knew in my heart that a new culture had to be built, almost a consent needed to be given to have a learning culture – a learning culture for life in this community. To develop this culture, I needed to “connect parents, teachers and students morally to each other and to their responsibilities as defined by shared purposes” (Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 83). My hope was that this connection would become part of a genuine connection with the broader community, and bring a wholistic vision of education to the town community.

### **Reflecting about leading**

It was vital for me to become reflective about teaching – about the education of the children in this community. It almost became an obsession to have a theoretical understanding of education so that I could 'get it right' for the children in my school community. I was of the same mindset as Senge (1992), and Beare, Caldwell and Millikan (1989) who believed that schools needed to be for learners, for lifelong learners, be vision driven, be innovative, be democratic, follow a system of assessment and reporting, engage students and have teachers skilled to teach across the curriculum. I knew clearly that for learning to be relevant and lasting, teachers and students in the school would need to be part of a team that functioned together in an extraordinary way - a team who trusted, who complemented, who compensated to produce extraordinary results. I believed the school needed to have a culture that was caring and compassionate, and that needed to be a community of learners where people were resources for each other. I understood that the challenge facing me was to ensure that the school “steadfastly maintain[ed] its identity, yet



[was] able to respond creatively to the complex and demanding situations imposed by the new turbulent environment” (Rumble, 1999, p. 4). While no one could predict with accuracy the precise nature of the world the community was within, I understood that there were four certainties for the future:

- that people problems would become even greater and that children must be equipped with the necessary skills in understanding human relationships **(relationships)**
- that knowledge would continue to expand at rates yet unknown. The idea of a teacher who had all the knowledge was dead **(teaching and learning)**
- that change would continue at an increasing speed **(change)**
- that societies of the future would be dependent on caring, responsible citizens who feel positive about themselves and are able to be responsive to the needs of others **(student leadership)** (Author Unknown).

I use these certainties as guideposts to tell the story of schooling in the Ferndale community.

I learnt that my role as leader was filled with paradox and tension. Writing my own role description in 1997, after doing the work for a number of years, was a way of clarifying what I did, and why I did what I did. (Appendix A: Principal Role Description) This role description remained with me for the rest of my time in Ferndale and I still use it as a guide to my work. It was a powerful tool for me to bring all the different roles of my work together.

### **Quality relationships**

Never forgetting that the intrinsic purpose of the school was for children to learn, I believed that the quality of relationships was an accurate measure of the learning taking place. If relationships were warm and nurturing, the servant model I was trying to follow would be alive and active. As leader within the school, I endeavoured to place a high priority on the building of relationships. I continually challenged myself to evaluate how people were listened to,



understood and accepted within the school. This evaluation was vital in the learning process. Beginning to build relationships concerned itself with treasuring the sacredness of the 'other'. Servant-leaders must "make a deep commitment to listening intently to others" (Spears, 1995, p. 4). Traditionally, the leader has been the person who makes decisions. However, "Servant-leaders seek to identify and clarify the will of the group. They seek to listen receptively to what is being said" (Spears, 1995, p. 4). I would also add to Spears' comment, 'and not being said.' I believed this building of relationships was as important as the curriculum, and although at times this was forgotten with the weight of curriculum to be covered, and the various interruptions to the day, I remained mindful of its absolute importance and relevance in the small community situation.

I had been struck by the degree of low self-esteem within the children. They hit out at each other against those they perceived as more successful, or a threat to who they themselves were. Some children were withdrawn, retreating into the isolation of self-hatred. Some parents insisted that their children have nothing to do with certain other children. One mother asked me to keep her son separate from her nephew:

*I don't want Thomas to play with his cousin Jim. I don't get along with Jim's mother. We don't have anything to do with the family or with his grandmother. She gave my dad's car away to Jim's mum when he died and she knew I needed a car for all my kids. That was it for me.*

*Oral request from parent, 1997*

Although this jotting can be perceived as a family 'tiff,' in a small community this kind of fracture had implications throughout the entire life of the school. The social relations of the community impacted strongly on connections within the school. Conflict within the wider community constantly worked to erode the culture that was being created in the school. The children were often divided in their allegiance to the emerging, new school culture, and to the norms of the



community. The children were often called to 'stand up and be counted' for what they believed to be the right course of action for themselves as a school community. This had to be manoeuvred carefully and strategically if the school was not to be seen as divisive within the community. Before I could build a learning community, I had to build an environment of safety where relationships were valued and trust and respect commonplace.

In 1999, the children from the school were invited by the Educational Consultant to deliver the opening address for the bi-annual teachers' conference for the regional area. She knew this would be a challenging experience for the children, but in her wisdom, she also knew that these children had the reality, the simplicity of heart, and the character, to deliver a much-needed message. The theme of the conference was '*Kindle the Fire Within.*' The children articulated their truth about their own realities and in so doing, expressed the reality for many children in schools. I never expected the raw honesty that I received in what they scripted.

On the day that the Senior children of the school, Grades 3-6, stood in front of 300 teachers and spoke out their truth, I felt humbled and proud to be in their company. The following are just seven examples of the truths they spoke:

*I am the voice of a child in your school. I try hard to speak like everyone else. I'm getting better but the journey will be long. I've resisted speaking out my thoughts because I sound different and that doesn't make me feel good.*

*I am the voice of a child in your school. My face is not always smiling and full of life and fun. I hide behind my face and do not let you see my pain. Everyday I worry. Everyday I hope but each day is the same. My mum is very sick, so very sick. She cannot even talk to me. School isn't important enough to me. I just don't care about learning. It's just too hard.*



*I am the voice of a child in your school. I struggle everyday to read and write. I have watched my mates flying with their work and I have felt like I am broken. Nothing comes easy – everything is hard. I'm convinced that I will always fail.*

*I am the voice of a child in your school. My mum left my brother and sister and me when I was little. We've lived with dad ever since. He's done everything for us. But I still wish mum was with us. I often think of what it would be like if she did. I sometimes dream about this. I love dad and he loves us and I feel guilty for wanting mum so much.*

*I am the voice of a child in your school. The fire in my body bursts out and I kick and scream and punch. My wild anger scares me and it scares those around me. I hit out at others because I really want to hit me.*

*I am the voice of a child in your school. I don't make friends easily. Kids seem to avoid me, not want to play with me – never pick me first in the team – always blame me – never stick up for me. I try to connect with them but it never seems to work.*

*I am the voice of a child in your school. I don't have the things that other kids have. I don't go to places that other kids go to. My parents are always worrying about money. Sometimes they fight about it. I know they love each other but it gets to them sometimes. I'm worried that they are going to fight too much and split.*





*I am the voice of a child in your school. I go home everyday to a different world. Dad's always out to it and mum's at work. Why can't life be easy. I'm sick of cooking tea and dad yelling at us kids.*

*Oral thoughts from the senior children, 1999*

When given the stem 'I am the voice of a child in your school,' the children expressed the reality of their own lives. As Principal I needed to recognize the backdrop of disadvantage and pain as I worked to create a learning environment for these children. The apparent dysfunction in their lives did not seem to be considered by the education system, its policies and its practices.

My agenda was clear. Not until I formed an authentic relationship with each child could I begin to support them to grow in a belief of their own self-worth in the community of Ferndale and beyond. I knew I must be an example of the servant-leader who serves the people and who teaches the people to serve each other.

These children and their realities forced me to reinvent myself and to question my tried and tested routines and strategies of teaching. I used every piece of energy and experience to support myself and still found myself left undone. The children called to question my inbuilt bank of wisdom that had given me an inner security in who I was as teacher. My understanding of 'teacher' had changed. This following journal jotting expresses something of the change that was happening within me.

*I thought I knew how to be the artist  
How to paint the picture  
What brushes to use  
How the colours mixed.  
How wrong I've been.  
How righteous I've become.*



*Feeling comfortable  
Steeped in ignorance and arrogance.  
I need to begin again,  
Reinvent the artist within  
I need to find a new palette  
Paint a new backdrop.  
Give it life and colour  
Find the Van Gogh within me  
New colours,  
New brush strokes unknown to my hand.  
Look for the landscape  
And give it vibrance and meaning  
With my own strength of feeling,  
Of understanding and just knowing.*

*Journal Extract 2000*

*"It is good to love many things, for therein lies strength, and whosoever performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done with love is well done." (Vincent Van Gogh)*

I, like the chameleon, had to find new colours, new shades of myself to become part of the Ferndale community. I had to identify within myself my own leadership, what was important in the leading and what was important to those being led. My colour, my colours, had to be authentic to the community, had to 'fit,' had to 'be' for the community.

Within the school community, authentic relational experiences were not only important but were vital, as many families were fractured and in some cases, there were no significant permanent, reliable adults in the children's lives. Many parents were harassed with unemployment, poverty and broken family relationships. For many of these children, school was the safest place where they could be attended to and cared about. They needed to have adults around them who affirmed them and celebrated their presence within the school and within the community. They needed to be helped to recognise their own gifts



and develop self-worth. I believed, then, and only then, would and could real learning take place.

I knew that my work involved the creation of a school that was different from what had been known as 'school' in Ferndale in the past and maybe, foreign to what was called school or classroom in other places. As I strove to bring hope and inner fulfillment into the lives of the children and their families, I believed that, somewhere within the educational environment that was being created, there was the chance for the children to live differently and create a life that was enriching and life giving for themselves. This environment had to be built on relationships of care and respect and a sense of realness: an authentic belief that the building of minds and spirits that wanted to learn, and that yearn to know more, was vital. This could, hopefully, instill a belief that learning could make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of those they held dear. If "other people's highest priority needs are being served, then there would be obvious signs of collegiality, power sharing, listening, appreciating and encouragement" (Spears, 1995, p. 4).

This work began a ten year journey of searching for what I believed to be the essence of teaching and learning - the building of authentic relationships of trust and understanding where there was a collective learning, where all within the school community were committed to learning and doing things differently, if that was what was called for. There was to be a passion about the 'other' and about the learning. I searched for deep learning – inevitably driven by the learner, not by an education system, or a teacher, with an irrelevant curriculum. I worked to bring the children to reflect on, and articulate, what they really wanted for themselves, their school and their community. A glimpse into some of the children's thoughts about what school meant to them showed that they did not hold high hopes for themselves:



*I go to school to learn so I can get a job. Dad can't work because he didn't learn.*

*I'm hoping to get a job working on the roads. I like working outside.*

*I want to be a hairdresser in Ferndale but I have to learn at school to give back the right money.*

*My mum said I might be able to work in the bank if I do my homework and go to school for a long time.*

*When I grow up I want to be a farmer. I wish dad had a farm.*

*I want to be cook at the pub. It's a good job and you don't have to work in the day.*

*If I stay at school, I'll be able to get a job like dad driving trucks. I want a job rather than being on the dole because it's not much money.*

*Oral comments of children, 1998*

The children's hopes show the limited range of possible futures they held for themselves. They also reflect the insular dreams the community held for their futures. Looking through these eyes, the Ferndale community could only stagnate. I felt I had to change the way the community viewed education for its children, and itself, so that the social, economic and personal reality for the small community could indeed be changed.

My work meant that imaginations needed to be captured, and commitment to learning harnessed. Stoll & Fink (1996) place great importance on the



relationship between the culture of the school and the type of students it produces. The morale's of the Ferndale students were strengthened as they grew in their belief in themselves through their "active involvement and responsibility" for the culture of their school (p.16).

### **Self-Discipline and Responsibility**

It was in these early days that I invested my time in ensuring that the children were responsible and self-disciplined within their school community. I felt Pastoral Care was my connector in supporting children to learn about themselves and each other. The past structures within the school had been punitive in dealing with student issues. As Principal, I inherited a very full punishment record book, including a section on records of parent conferences, as well as documented issues leading to a number of expulsions. This book recorded the amount of offences by certain children and the recorded meetings with their parents, outlining the support needed from home in the delivery of punishments. As I filed this document away for the required 22 years, I removed myself completely from this former regime. It had created a climate where the children did not show a strong sense of inner discipline; a school climate that was far from healthy, with children whose belief in their own inner wealth was depleted.

One boy, Tom, was feared by all, yet regarded as a leader of the school. He wielded his fierce temper against a relief teacher one day and held his classmates and teacher hostage in their classroom. Eventually I was able to coax him to let the children out of the room and, when alone with him, he wept helplessly. The ruffian, the bully, the power figure, the defiant one, had tried everything he could in the hope that someone would one day recognize or understand how desperate life was for him. Over time, he became a powerful force for good and became almost a 'grandfather figure' for the little ones. When he graduated, he wrote the following words and read them out to the children:



*I climbed out of a deep dark hole. I couldn't see the light and now I see the sun.*

*I used to hate and now I let myself be sad without letting the hate take me. I let myself smile and know that it's OK sometimes.*

*Leaving school and you guys will be tough, but I know I'm up to it.*

*All you guys got to understood me. You gave me a chance and I started to get along with myself.*

*You're my heroes.*

Written by Tom, Grade 6 student, 2002

Tom reflected on his past and how the other children in the school had supported him to become more peaceful and content. The small community of children learnt to support each other through listening, spending time with each other, and seeking understanding. As Tom received his graduation certificate, the children beamed with respect and pride in him. The use of the colloquial 'you guys' directly addressed the other children using their own familiar language and indicates the close relationship with the student community. Tom travelled through secondary school and became a Year Twelve School Captain. He is currently studying Psychology at university. He has chosen to disconnect from his family, is coping with city life, lives with three mates, and has a part-time job to support himself and his siblings.

I write about Tom because he was an example of a young person bringing the drama of his life to school and living it out with his class-mates everyday. He used the school environment to process his anger and his resentment for his home life. It was the safest, or maybe the only, place he had to do this in. Rather than a punitive form of discipline, Tom needed to be understood and his pain recognized. His behaviour was the outward sign of the turmoil in his life.



With their teachers, the children were entrusted with the task of formulating the school policy for self-discipline and responsibility. This document statement took almost a whole year and was completed in 1998. The process allowed the children to recognise their own dignity, and make life-enhancing choices about what was best for themselves as a group and as individuals within the group. They were part of the collaborative leadership of the school and were trusted to express their ideas and feelings. The shared decision-making and participation challenged the previous apathy, powerlessness and discontent of their parents, and their policy was the birthing of feelings of genuine commitment to values. Communal accountability became real. The children took the process very seriously and met often to discuss issues. It was written in their words, and like the script of their parents, was left unedited for the same reasons. The children's discussions did not always end in words being written on paper. Behaviour was being changed constantly as decisions were made by them. The children constantly challenged each other at these gatherings and I learnt to step back and watch and learn from the children as they created their own way of caring at Ferndale. There was no place in this process for autocratic adults or children. (Appendix B: Children's Self-Discipline and Responsibility Document)

### **Policy development**

While the adult community became involved in scripting a new vision based on respecting the uniqueness of life within the school, the children, with their teachers, were entrusted with the task of formulating the school policy for self-discipline and responsibility. Ownership was being given to the 'custodians' of the school. I knew that, with ownership, would come the creation of what was needed for the school at that point in time. Given its background of change and lack of ownership, this community needed to reclaim its ownership of, and responsibility for the school. The vision statement created by the parents was short and clear, echoing the hopes and dreams of the community for its children. It was a visible sign of growth in their understanding of what their school could be for their children and themselves:



*Our Vision for Ferndale Primary School is for a school that is essentially a place for our children:  
a community within a community,  
established to give hope to our children, our families and our community, so that we all may be nurtured in an environment where the past is respected and the future embraced.*

*School Vision Statement, written end 1996*

This was the final draft by the Ferndale School Board, with input by the parents of the children. This vision is a personal vision as indicated by the use of 'our'. I was tempted to edit and change the way words were put together, but in a short space of time, Ferndale had taught me about the importance of people telling their own story. I felt that leaving the language exactly as it had been said, by the people who mattered most, was more important in a vision statement than the way words had been put together. What was important was the sincerity of the process and the fact that these words belonged to the community. They required no editing by me.

This vision, written in 1996, is still recognised as the vision for the school today, despite a number of reviews.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided the socio-economic context of my research. It has focussed on the reality for the members of the Ferndale community, emphasising the hardships, the perceptions, the conflicts and the life stories of the children in the school and the community members. The chapter concentrates on the need for a culture that concerns itself with connecting members of the community to each other, in an attempt to build a caring, compassionate learning community for the school and the wider community.





### **The story continues...**

In the next chapter, I explore my own reality as Principal in Ferndale. The chapter recognises that the life of the inner Principal is a vital one to be considered, to give an accurate understanding of educational leadership – one that is rarely referred to in the current, educational leadership literature.



## CHAPTER 5

### TELLING THE STORY

#### THE PRINCIPAL WITHIN



*...teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness...As I teach, I project the condition of the soul onto my students...Teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in the mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge ...When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life...*

\_\_\_\_\_Palmer,1998



## **Introduction**

This chapter explores my own inner struggles, doubts and tensions about the role of leading within a school context. It begins with providing a history of myself before doing the leading, and then attempts to document an honest, authentic journey to know who it is, that is doing the leading.

## **The early years**

To give context to the leader within, I need to go back to my early experiences of family, community and to my early education at school.

On the last day of June 1953, a few moments before midnight, I was born ~ fondly referred to by my father as 'a little tax deduction'. I had entered human history. When strong enough I was taken home to my parents' farm and to a culture that would shape and form the very essence of my being and my spirit.

In the mid 19th century, many Irish people had left their homeland to seek a new life in Australia. Notable numbers of them began to settle in the district that I came to call home. The sea and the green hills were reminiscent of the land from which they had come. These Irish settlers introduced their native spirituality to the district. They lived as they had hoped to live in their homeland. Surrounded by the influences of Irish Celtic spirituality and Irish culture, I set down my roots and received my spiritual nourishment. This culture had a strong insistence on discipline and this discipline bred a fear within me. In 1960, fear was never far from the word 'school'.

My first experience of fear came when, at the age of four, I was sent to school to receive a 'good education.' This education was to have a profound bearing on my life. It was to condition my consciousness. In my part of the world, I was being influenced by the 'Irish' way of doing things. At school, silence was seen as the greatest discipline I could learn. I did not know why, but I knew I must be silent almost all the time. I learned very quickly that I was to be obedient to my elders. Life was meant to be hard, school was meant to be tough and if I was



punished, it was needed and deserved. Unjust behaviours, such as children being punched, locked in cupboards, tied to desks, were never discussed. They were seen as deserved. Playground cruelties of torment, ridicule and physical hardships were dealt with only if they happened to a child 'that didn't deserve it.' Injustices were to be borne and accepted as blessings that I could learn and grow from. From a very young age I was taught not to get involved in people's lives. This was a strong direction from my home, my peers, their families and from my school.

Living in this culture, and entrenched in its spirituality in the 1950s and 1960s, created a cocoon of security. Everything was in its place and there was a place for everything. A school report from 1963 gives some insight into the rigidity of the education I had received:

*Your child must learn the value of respect. She has a whimsical, spirited nature and tends to place no credence on authority nor those in authority. I suggest you reign her in this area to help her to discipline herself for her future. She also has a quick, clever mind that needs to be constrained if she is to remain focused on academic tasks.*

*My School Report, 1963*

My 'whimsical, spirited nature' put me at odds with my teachers. There was no appreciation or acceptance of a creative spirit or for a 'thinking beyond the square.' If things were not understood or if they did not fit into the culture, then they could be judged harshly. Not until I left this way of looking of the world, did I realize this was not the way everyone lived their lives. I had lived in a protected, closely knit community that told me how to think, how to act and how to judge. It never challenged me to look beyond, and when I did challenge, my challenges were seen as defiant behaviour.



## **Journey to becoming a teacher**

I set out on a journey to become a teacher with the hope of returning to my hometown with the necessary skills and qualifications to equip me to do things very differently from the way they had been done for me. I was thrown into a world of the 1970s where everyone seemed to be searching, screaming out for a different way of living and I was left confused. My way of doing things did not fit and seemed irrelevant. I found myself confused with the expectations and judgements of my past and felt as if I was on the wrong side of the road, too frightened to cross over.

My experience of the 1980's classroom was one where professional development was seen as vital for the ongoing growth of teachers. Classrooms were vibrant, open spaces of learning where teachers had much freedom in interpreting the curriculum. The language of information skills, open areas of learning, integrated studies and connectivity in learning were beginning to take shape. Within this environment, I felt much energy and passion.

Becoming a teacher, becoming a wife and mother, kept me very engaged and busy with life. In retrospect, I feel I buried my deep desire to get in touch with myself and to find out who I really was and how I fitted into the world. As time has gone on, I have found that relating to others can only be done as well as I relate to myself. From a past cultural and spiritual experience where I, the self, was the most unimportant, insignificant part of life, I began to grapple with the reality that my own authentic self had been below the surface of consciousness. For me to be the person, wife, mother, friend, daughter, teacher I wanted to be, I needed to awaken who I really was within the relationship of my life. I recognized my identity included being a person who:

- was a seeker;
- journeyed through life in company with others;
- valued (or sought to value) my own individuality;
- valued the community I lived and worked in;



- continued to express consciously, verbally and authentically my understanding of myself in the world; and
- lived life in the ordinary events and interactions of everyday.

### Teaching in the 1990s

Within this context, school was changing its shape. External pressures were at force in the 1990s that were leaving me questioning and confused about what had always been for me my passion – teaching. Brown and Moffett (1999) would suggest that I was experiencing “the sense of spinning out of control” (p. 87). They use this term to refer to “experiences in education...accompanied by our inclination to revert back to the sense of a lost past. We are nostalgic for a lost set of values, shared beliefs and standards that we dimly believe we once had in common – but have now somehow lost” (Brown & Moffett, 1993, p.87). I no longer felt education was really connecting with what was vital in the lives of the children I was teaching. My journal jotting at this time reflected a sense of loss and perhaps a measure of helplessness to do anything about what was happening:

*From the pure, clear raindrops  
Come the crystalline twig,  
From the small child  
Comes the hopes of past generations  
The dreams for a future  
The inspiration for change.  
Education is the instrument  
The unlocking of the past unfulfilled  
And the dreams unspoken.  
It can be simple and ordinary  
Like nature itself  
If grounded in the child  
If centred on the child.*



*Why is it becoming removed and complicated  
Cold, competitive and removed  
From the heart and soul of the child?  
From the broken hurt spirit  
Comes the beautiful sprout  
From the darkness and stillness of night  
Comes the light and life of day  
From the turbulent rage of the deep sea  
Comes the calm, rippling, beached pool*

*Personal Journal extract, 1994*

In this extract I am using the metaphor of nature to express what I believed was happening in the world of education in the early 1990s. I was feeling a coldness, a competitiveness creeping into education, that was bringing data driven impositions and expectations from within and without the education system. Curriculum expectations and the artificial elements of some data, were contrasting directly with the natural, authentic elements that were part of the ebb and flow of everyday living, teaching and learning. I felt tension around a belief that the world of the child was not being considered and held grave fears for children in this environment.

I recognized that there were overwhelming psychological, economic, social and technological forces that were impacting on schools, creating an increasing complexity. I felt the data driven system of decontextualised results and targets were becoming more important in the educational agenda than the children themselves. I held the belief that politics was driving the educational agenda and that those within the education system were failing to be heard. So much of what was seen as vital in the educational system, I felt resistant to. The work I did seemed only important in the confines of the classroom and seemed removed from what the education system was seeing as an important reality in the children's lives. What was the purpose of it all if it was not connected and relevant and seen as important in children's lives. What was happening to me?



I was going through a crisis as an educator, at the cross roads, as I struggled to connect. At this time in my life, I was calling into question every foundation that I had built my life's work on. I considered looking beyond schools to doing other things with my life.

Towards the end of 1994, I was questioning my purpose for teaching:

*I struggle with what is happening in the education system...where people, their feelings, their stories, their hearts are becoming obsolete in the business of education. I struggle with the ever-present thought of if this continues, then who I am and what I value is also becoming obsolete.*

*Personal Journal extract, 1994*

My struggle with the changing education system was/is both personal and social. I use the word 'obsolete' to suggest the complete negation of the 'personal' that seemed to me to be left out of educational policies at that time. My own investment in education is captured in my 'struggle' to locate my values in a socio-educational system that had now become a 'business'.

The doubt and confusion behind these words led me to apply for a teaching position in a small rural school some 80 kilometres from my home. This application came after two weeks of concern, and much soul searching and encouragement from my family. I was looking for connection. I believed that perhaps it could be found in a small community and that perhaps, in this community, I would be able to lose my cynicism that I knew was harmful to myself as an educator, to the students in my care and to myself personally. I hoped a passion would be regenerated that could in fact 'make the difference' I had always believed was the role of the teacher.





## **Early days in Ferndale**

My application was successful, but, soon after school began in 1995, I learnt that I had been very romantic in my perception of life in the small, rural school. My thoughts that life would be better and different and more balanced were very naïve. This change in school and community was to become the catalyst that would catapult me deep within myself to find what I truly believed was a credible teacher, community member and authentic individual. It was a journey within that was lived out in a very public way as the school Principal.

Within a few weeks of my appointment and my working in the community, my Principal became ill and I was asked to 'care-take' the school for the remainder of the year. I was asked to take on a leadership position that I was not ready for. I had never thought beyond my classroom. My experience of leadership in my own teaching career had been of distant, autocratic leaders - leaders who were good technicians and sound managers, who provided ordered environments for students and staff where there was regimentation, security and predictability. My mindset was that leadership was always to be avoided as it removed educators away from what was essential - the students. This mindset was simplistic and naïve, but it led me to believe that leadership was to be avoided, and more importantly, that I certainly was not a leader, as I considered it a distant, removed, aloof position within a school, one I never aspired to. My decision to 'care-take' came after many sleepless nights as I considered the request. Thoughts flooded in about my inability, my inadequacies and my lack of administrative skills.

*I am embarking on a journey  
I know I'm ill-equipped  
Beginning the journey is painful  
My anguish is real  
It's time for me to stay strong  
Through a time of disorientation and disintegration  
To be really honest and thorough in my thinking  
And embrace what lies ahead*



*With courage to look within  
To what is essentially me  
Looking at my inner conflict  
Of what it means to be an educator  
Knowing that I still have not touched the soul  
Of what it means to be an educator  
Time to journey, to search  
To hopefully understand  
As I work with a broken community  
To find meaning and a sense of purpose and hope.*

*Personal Journal Extract, 1995*

This extract hints at fear couched in terms of an imminent battle within myself that needed to be fought and won. There is a recognition that strength was needed to manage my mixed feelings of inadequacy in the role of leading a school community. But there was also my sense of purpose and hope in myself as I determined to 'embrace' the future in the role. It hints at my own naïve understanding of the journey ahead but shows a recognition of my own inadequacies, my own lack of resources.

### **Cynicism and suspicion**

My fears of the battle to be waged were compounded by the cynicism of the town and school community. This was something I was unaccustomed to in my past and certainly I had no sense of the history of this cynicism. Each day was a difficult one. The children were very guarded, disinterested in their learning and saw school as a chore that had to be done. I was unused to this type of apathy and negativity within a school and found myself frustrated and regretful about my decision to leave my old school. In addition, parents and townspeople were suspicious of my coming into their town and their community.

No parents came into the school in those early days. However, as I supervised the children's leaving the school one night, a parent got out of his car and



walked towards me. I remarked that Ferndale was a great town and that it was good to be there. I was quickly reminded of where I was however, as he replied: "What do you want to get out of us?" As tears welled up in my eyes, I knew I was in a place quite different from my past and that I needed to understand the resentment and the distance that was prevalent all around me. This man later became a rock of support for me as he shared my vision of building a school community that was vibrant, with a curriculum that was engaging and connected to its community.

In those early times, days were long, there were no affirmations, much heartache and despair and I could not feel or see much hope. School life was very disconnected from my home life, something I had not experienced before.

*When will things change? Every afternoon I go out the front of the school to supervise the kids to get in their cars and go home. I am now at the stage of living in hope that one day someone will just say 'hello.' I struggle with the reasoning inside my head as to whether I should make the first move and introduce myself or should I just respect this aloof way of being. Perhaps I just have to step back and respect what is going on in this place. If nothing else I am going to learn how to be truly resilient and thick skinned. It is all so strange. Tomorrow is another day!*

*Personal Journal Extract, 1995*

My experience of the discourse of being a Principal/teacher was being challenged in Ferndale. The behaviours I was accustomed to, that is, supervising children after school and chatting with parents, were being challenged by the suspicion of the parents of Ferndale who saw me, possibly as an authoritative 'enemy'. I was, though, beginning to realize that, in order for me to be accepted, I would need to 'respect' these attitudes, which were part of a culture I was yet to understand. Were they being aloof? On reflection, that is



quite a middle-class word and attitude to bring to a rural community that was accustomed to teachers being transient and unconnected to the community.

### **Connection with staff**

It was at this time I knew two things – I had to connect with myself and I had to connect with my staff. The staff consisted of two local women, one a teacher and the other who worked in the office and did all the administrative duties of the school. The teacher had seen many changes in the school as each new Principal came and went. She had experienced four Principals in her ten years of working there. She wrote:

*All my Principals have been very different kind of leaders. One was very autocratic. At least I knew my place and I just made sure I stayed in it. One was very removed from the school and everyone in it. He left me to do my teaching and never asked any questions. I never felt that anything I did was of any value in his eyes. He didn't stay long. Another wanted to change everything and made everyone connected to the school feel that there was nothing worth preserving. The community did not support her. She left in the middle of the year and I'm not sure what really happened but the Board complained a lot. Another treated the children poorly and I know many of them were anxious and uncomfortable with their learning. I wanted to change things for them but couldn't. My thoughts were not considered.*

*Notes taken from Annual Review Meeting document. 1995*

To a certain extent, the teacher is reflecting the early attitudes of the people of the town community towards teachers and the school in that she had expected the Principal to be 'autocratic', and that she would know her 'place' in the hierarchy. Others had wanted to change everything before they moved on. All had made clear that the power relations between Principal and staff were



explicit and unambiguous: Principals knew best, and her thoughts ‘were not considered’. This would, presumably, have also been the perspectives of the parents who would have shared her distrust of the Principals’ motives towards the school and the children’s learning.

The secretary had been a past pupil of the school, born in the town, married to a local, sent her own children to the school and had come back to the school when she offered her services to support the school. She had seen two decades of ‘colour-changing’ principals and was sceptical of anything I suggested. As I was finding it difficult to connect with her, I asked her to write down her thoughts:

*I've seen a lot in the past 20 years. This school is just seen as a stepping stone, a place to practice on. No one stays more than two or three years, have nothing to do with the town, think they're God in the school and then leave. They come and do what they like, changing uniforms, different books for the kids. One puts something up the next pulls it down. One even made me buy a uniform like the nurses aides in the hospital. I see all the enthusiasm when they come and it never lasts long. It comes again when it is time for them to go. The kids are caught in all of this and so are the families and me.*

*Jottings of secretary. 1995*

This secretary’s jottings reflect the community’s perception about Principals coming to and going from the school. To the community, this predictable transience proved that the school and its community was a ‘way’ to somewhere else, a ‘stepping stone’. It was never considered a destination in itself. The secretary reflected the community’s perception that principals were seen as coming into the community, taking what they needed and going onto a ‘decent’ school. This ‘stepping stone’ to a ‘decent school’ cared little about children, their families and the community. She believed that the children had suffered



from all the change. In effect, Ferndale school was given definition by Brown & Moffett (1999) as a “state of unconscious innocence” where there are “attempts at quick fixes, one-shot interventions and magic bullets” (p. 540). I used this woman as a window into the past and I soon came to realize that she was as wounded as the community itself. She saw her role as ‘protector’ of the children because she felt that no one in the school really understood their journey. I came to trust this woman as the ‘keeper of the story’ and it was through her that I was able to gain insight into the realities of the school and the community.

### **A reality check**

Within four weeks of taking up the ‘care-taker’ position in the school, I received a letter (unsigned):

*Dear Principal*

*I am writing to express my concern over the behaviour of the children representing Ferndale Primary School at the peak fitness challenge event I attended last Wednesday. As an observer on this day, I was exposed to insolence, swearing and aggressive fighting by the children wearing your school's logo. They engaged in the habit of putting each other down with their crude remarks and suggestive mannerisms.*

*To add to this, I currently have two young children. I would not wish my children to ever be within a school community such as what I witnessed last week. I will express my now extremely negative opinion of your school to any friend or colleague who might request it. I hope this letter brings to your attention the need to address this situation, as I believe it reflects extremely poor on your school and on the children of the Ferndale school and district.*

*Unsigned letter from anonymous author, 1995*



This unsigned letter came as no surprise to me. The words described a student community of mistrust and negativity, with no real sense of purpose or of a future. The children displayed no sign of having any resources within themselves to do better or to respect themselves or anyone else. The behaviour described was harsh, cruel and insolent by society's standards. But I knew that the behaviour was a reflection of the disconnection from the basic values of respect and dignity for self and others. This anonymous, judging observer had no understanding that these young people were products of their culture, a culture within a world in constant turmoil.

The everyday occurrences of the school were 'put downs,' bullying behavior, low level language, physical hurts and verbal torments. Children were within a 'culture' that honored the strongest bullies. The weak, gentle, sensitive children struggled to be listened to and respected. One such child, a Grade 6 girl expressed her feelings in a piece of writing in 1996:

*I don't belong and I never will.  
I'm not strong enough to disagree with them  
And I'm too weak  
To tell my truth about what happens.  
I cry inside when they laugh at me  
And trip me and poke me and push me  
I hate them but I pretend they're my friends  
I don't tell them what I think  
Because I'm scared  
I just pretend I'm OK.  
When they leave me alone  
I know they pick on someone else  
Sometimes that feels worse  
Especially when it's a little kid.*

*Writing from a Grade 6 student, 1996*



This child's writing expressed the culture of the school. She had learnt how to survive in this culture, if you would call it survive. Her home life was harsh and oppressive. Yet, even though her day-to-day life in the school was filled with anxiety, it preserved a sense of routine, reliability and safety that was unknown to her in her harsh, oppressive home life. She had learnt to protect herself at school by pretending to cope with what was happening around her. She also had to bear guilt and blame as she witnessed other children experiencing what she was feeling.

### **Deepening of understanding**

As Principal, I felt ill-equipped for the road ahead. My heart broke for this child and all the children of this school community. I knew I had to find the resources within myself to do the work that needed to be done. I had to "take a journey through (my) inner territory – a journey that'll require opening doors that are shut, walking in dark spaces that are frightening and touching the flame that burns" (Kouzes & Posner, 2000, p. 52). This young Grade 6 girl's piece of writing marked the time I began to move beyond my own self-centredness, to a place where the children became my central focus and my reason for every decision I made from that day forward. I began the search to deepen my understanding of the reality for the children in the school. I had grown in the understanding that:

Leadership exists when people are no longer victims of circumstances but participate in creating new circumstances. When people operate in this domain of generative leadership, day by day, they come to a deepening understanding of how the universe actually works...Leadership is about creating a domain in which human beings continually deepen their understanding of reality and become more capable of participating in the unfolding of the world. (Senge, 1992, p. 3)

At this time I went into the dark place that Kouzes writes about. "We stare into the darkness of our inner territory and begin to wonder what lies inside" (1999,





p.59). Kouzes' words touched my 'guts' – the children of Ferndale touched my guts and called me to find out:

- Who was 'me' in this place?
- What was the passion and the pain that I felt?
- What would happen to this place and its children?

*My body lies empty  
Its frailties scoured  
Devoured of real energy  
My soul feels void  
My arms and heart have reached out so often  
Wanting to nurture and embrace what I believe  
Only to be left shaken  
Left with my bruises.  
My soul sees the scene  
And recoils back into my being  
Waiting, hoping, watching  
I venture into waters unknown  
I know it is the heart that calls  
The heart awaits the echo of the soul  
Where will these unknown waters take me?  
I tremble within  
But yet venture forth in the hope  
That my dreams for this community  
Can be realized.*

*Personal Journal Jotting, 1997*

This jotting was at a time of looking within to what was real and important in my work in Ferndale. It was written at a time in my Principalship that I was at my lowest - empty, scoured, devoured, void. I was struggling to feel hopeful and positive, which was a foreign experience for me, as my teaching and personal life had always breathed energy and optimism into my being. The choice of



words in my jotting indicated a sense of hope that was counteracted by the continual feelings of frustration and deep sadness at my inability to connect with the community. Still, somewhere deep within, was a belief that a dream could be realized for these children that would be life-giving.

The leader in the school community was the person who really had to know something about creating a school that was going to bring change to the lives of its students; create a school that was connected and relevant to their lives. The one area I had confidence in was my ability to relate to students and teach them well. I knew learning, and I knew the art of teaching. I knew this was the place from which to begin my work. It was where I knew my voice could be heard. “Leaders must find their voice, and then they must clarify and distinctively give voice to their values” (Kouzes & Posner, 2000, p.14). However I was warned that voice is only one aspect for the leader to concentrate on, as “deeds are far more important than their words when determining how serious [leaders] really are about what they say. Words and deeds must be consistent” (Kouzes & Posner, 2000, p.14).

### **Leading and challenging**

I knew that I would have to commit myself to learning about leadership, acquire the competence needed, continuously assess my existing abilities and learn new ones, if I was going to be recognized as credible. I needed to connect my leading intimately with the lives of my students and understand their culture so I could begin to understand their learning. I needed to recognize the importance of the community, not just the school community. I had to hold onto my passion for children, but deepen this passion beyond what I had known as a teacher. I had to find their dreams and fight to ensure that these dreams became realities. I knew these were non-negotiables if my work in the school was to offer the children a real chance of tapping into their dreams, their hopes and their potentials. I questioned the system I was part of and questioned the structures within the system by contextualizing them for my community. I had to rethink myself as an educator. For me there was no comfort in the past. I had to



ensure that the school met the demands and challenges of educating in the bush. The traditional education system was no longer appropriate. Art Costa (1994) said “curriculum is like a cemetery. We keep putting things in and never take anything out” (p. 55). I found myself challenging curriculum, standards, expectations and the ways of working with children. This brought with it much risk, but I kept believing that if leadership was to be relational, founded on trust and confidence, then I had to keep taking risks, making changes and keep the children and their needs at the forefront of my thoughts. I was mindful of Boyer’s words, as cited in Sergiovanni, (1987) “Without a thorough grounding in the realities of the classroom, Principals will continue to feel inadequate and uncomfortable in educational leadership roles” (p. 54).

### **‘Dark nights of the soul’**

Challenging the status quo meant that I suffered many ‘dark nights of the soul.’ Again Kouzes’ words echoed in my heart, “We’ve invested so much time and energy in learning to do the right things, we suddenly see that they are no longer serving us well. They seem hollow” (1999, p. 37). I clearly saw that much of what I had considered valid teaching practice and principles were now indeed hollow with these children in this place.

I had found myself feeling very alone, confused and restricted, trying to balance the expectations of the curriculum and the needs of my students. Curriculum did not match the students’ needs all the time. Task orientated activities and subject based learning reflected a hierarchical organizational structure with very little understanding of the wholistic nature of the school I was trying to create. In a rapidly changing world, and with rural communities experiencing change at an incredible rate, the traditional model of schooling was no longer appropriate. This school needed a leadership that was authentic and that would support the building of relationships. I needed to create a school as a place for the generation of ideas and their dissemination throughout the community. There was no room for doubt within myself. I needed inner strength and commitment.



All around, however, I found 'small picture' mentality. After attending a Principals' meeting I reflected:

*The last three professional days have been frustrating. I sit and think of my school and try to create relevance, a meaning, a connection between what I know to be my reality in Ferndale and what is expected of me as Principal. I listen to small picture talk about new innovations in teacher practice. Somehow the core of what is important is being missed or not even known.*

*Personal Journal Jotting, 1998*

The professional development discourse over these days was far removed from the reality of the Ferndale school. I had been lectured at, asked to discuss irrelevant scenarios with my peers, and had listened to what I considered worthless, empty discussions about a school system that I no longer felt part of. I saw it as insular, having no significance or relevance in the lives of children, and offering no strategic thinking for schools of the future. The school I was working to change needed a mindset that was steadfast in changing children's lives through the educative process of the school. I held the belief that, through a school, children could be given a hope for the future. But there was a disjunction between the discourse I was exposed to and the sense of urgency I was feeling about the change that was needed. I felt unsupported, misunderstood and left undone as I left this conference. I knew I would have to look at my own inner resources for support and look beyond the system I was in to seek assistance.

### **Leading alone**

At this time, there was an overwhelming sense of being on my own to support this community. I felt no support from the system I was in. I felt my school was small, insignificant and of little importance on the broad education scene. Phelps, as cited in Sullivan (1996) certainly showed an understanding of this 'being on my own' when he wrote that:



The leader can consult outside of hours with his superiors or colleagues: he can get advice and talk over his difficulties. But when he goes into the classroom, shuts the door...and looks into the shining morning faces, then he is thrown back absolutely on himself. No power on earth can help him, and nothing can save the situation if he makes a blunder. There he needs all his resources, all his courage and infinite patience. (p. 23)

Palmer (1998) understood what it felt like to only have the self as the resource, nothing else. It was my only resource, the strongest connection I had that was plausible and authentic to me. This “thrown back absolutely on himself” was being worn heavily by me at this time. The title of Palmer’s last chapter of his book, *The Courage to Teach* is ‘We teach who we are.’ I was quickly learning that the concept of ‘teaching who we are’ for me specifically was ‘I teach who I am’, and it was synonymous to ‘I lead who I am.’

...teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness...As I teach, I project the condition of the soul onto my students, my subjects, and our way of being together...Teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in the mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge, and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject...When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject – not at the deepest levels of embodied personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from a world as I am from personal truth. (Palmer, 1998, p. 2)

I was growing in inner belief, confidence and strength, that my teaching, my belief in myself as a credible, authentic teacher could be transferred to a belief



in myself as a credible, authentic leader. Within myself grew a harmony, a presence of mind, a self-knowing. This was flowing into all areas of my life and without being fully aware of it, the Principal, the teacher, the wife, mother, woman was becoming connected to the self that I had been searching for.

Within the broken, desperate, isolated community, I was finding my way back to myself, to my home, and certainly to this community. I had moved from despair and self-doubt to opening myself to the community. It was at this time that I made the connection that my journey 'home' was no different from that of my students. Palmer (1998) wrote about this connection I was making. He expressed this knowing:

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves...and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used by these weavers vary widely...The connections made by good teachers are not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning heart in the ancient sense, as the place where the intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self. (p.11)

### **Leading and teaching**

I was beginning to move from the mindset of teacher to leader. I was beginning to look beyond the curriculum, the lesson plans and activities, beyond the nuts and bolts of the classroom teacher perspective to a broader perspective of the school. My picture of education broadened. Becoming Principal took me to another place, a place where the pictures in my mind were much broader but still nestled in the landscape of the children. It was at this time that I felt I had gained my education in the fundamentals of leadership. These fundamentals had been learnt through searching my soul, finding my inner voice and finding how to authentically speak that voice. This had happened quickly and before I recognized the happening. A journal jotting at this time indicates that I had



found my voice and was strong in who was speaking and in what needed to be said:

*My task is to get to know my own identity  
I need to contact myself – the me that lays hidden  
Sometimes frightened, sometimes excited – deep within  
I need to contact the life force within  
I am not here to prove myself  
I am here as a woman – unafraid to speak  
Of what is essential – what is intrinsic in the education of  
children  
My purpose is to speak as a woman  
    With my heart  
    With my instinct  
    With my intuition  
    With my feelings  
    With my feet firmly on the ground  
Making sure that the ground is firm under my feet.*

*Personal Journal Jotting 1998*

This journal jotting, written after four years' experience in the Ferndale community, is significant as it indicates a movement towards being clear and decisive about my role in the education of children - in how to be a Principal in Ferndale. It gives clear definition to myself as a female leader, no longer concerned with the way my male counterparts did their leading. It marks a time when I finally recognized that being a woman provided me with credible, worthy traits to do my leading.

### **Leading and learning**

I began to be a student of the school and community. I came to the realization that I had to look to the town for support. I needed to make sense of what was the town, within the small rural community, within an environment of isolation,



low socio-economic status, low self-esteem and unemployment. There was pain and brokenness caused over years of change and disruption, as the community came to the realization that its identity, purpose and pride as a rural community was being lost. This created the context for what was happening within the school and for the cynicism I had experienced. The town was going out of business, and all around were feelings of resentment, worthlessness and hopelessness. The children were reflections of the community's reality, as it impacted on them heavily. Their school had existed within the shadows of a possible closure for over a decade and the children feared being transported to a larger school, 30 kilometres away. Everything else was closing down in the town and it seemed inevitable that the school would be next. I realised this could happen quickly and quietly as there was no energy within the school system to preserve the school. A spokesperson at a meeting in 1998 concerning the future of the school, reminded me that "over the next few years, you will be packing up the school. Your main task is to do this carefully but surely." These words, coming from my Educational Consultant at the time, didn't take into account the community's dreams, their hopes, aspirations, visions and values. There was no sense of a community in this 'packing up.'

At this time in 1998, the school was beginning to become a focal point for the community to meet. It was becoming a gathering place. People would bring their concerns to the school, and the children would be charged with energy to solve the problems. One such issue was when a local community member came to school to ask the children to make placards as he had heard the bank was to be closed. He had heard a TV crew was coming to the town and the placards would help in presenting the views of the community to a wider community. The school quickly responded and received national coverage for the small town going out of business. The bank was not saved, but this was the first of many times when the community looked to the school for support in its survival. These times will be explored in the chapter on Community.





I, like the chameleon, was changing. I saw myself as a 'protector' of the school and its community and used every avenue I could to speak out for the community. I searched out how the kind of person I was, bringing with me my life story, was influencing the way I was leading my life in this small, rural community. I acknowledged my past cultural and spiritual identity and the dreams I held for the future of the community. I began to listen to the past cultural and spiritual experiences of my community as they were expressed in the day-to-day relationships and dealings I was having.

### **Leading and serving**

I determined to evaluate my own leadership within the context of the school community, from the leadership platform of servant leadership. As already stated, I connected with Greenleaf who "focused on building a better, more caring society" (Spears, 1995, p.3). Greenleaf believed that great leaders must first serve others. His leadership model of serving others was a wholistic approach, emphasizing service to others and a sense of community and shared decision-making. I endeavoured to hold steadfast to a commitment to Greenleaf's leadership perspective as I grew in understanding of the concept of servant-leadership and in an understanding of the community within which I worked. The school community had experienced distant, authoritarian leadership in the past, and although I was only beginning to understand the servant model of leadership, I felt it was time to be a co-worker in the community, serving the community from within. A characteristic of the servant leader that I related easily to is the "holding something in trust for another" (Spears, 1995, p.6). This holding meant that I had to be committed to knowing the community. I saw stewardship as trust where the community's story became sacred and respected. If the story was sacred, so also were the people who made and told the story. These people had to be given the right to tell their story. Greenleaf's (1977) questions echoed in my ears constantly: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p.13).



The concept of servant-leader was a pathway for me to become real and authentic as a leader in the community and in my personal life. Servant leadership “is the domain of those who are caught up in the spirit of service. To deny the spirit is to deny the fullness of our growth and that of others” (Smith, 1995, p. 310). I worked to empower the community to find a purpose that had been lost, disintegrated, and deemed useless, by looking for expressions of core beliefs, values, traditions and symbols which would provide meaning for the community and provide the stability and certainty that seemed needed. “It is up to Principals to get the vision conversation started and to keep it going. A place to begin is for them to talk about their values and the hopes and dreams that they have for the school” (Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 84). A climate of partnership needed to be fostered, and I needed to create a common, truly authentic vision and assist in articulating it forcefully.

I was learning that

leadership was not the private reserve of a few charismatic men and women. It is a process ordinary people use when they are bringing forth the best from themselves and others. What we’ve discovered is that people make extraordinary things happen by liberating the leader within everyone. (Kouzes & Posner, 2000, p. xxiii)

I felt I was able to touch the wounds of the community as it unravelled its bandages and opened its past pain and experiences of dominance and misunderstanding. I had much to learn. I found myself again looking at questions about my place in the community. I was reflecting and meditating on hearing my own voice speaking to me about what I really cared about:

- Who am I?
- What am I doing in this community?
- Who are these people?
- What do these people mean to me?
- What is the level of my connectedness with these people?



Kouzes & Posner (2000) ask similar questions: What are you really feeling? What are the choices that you're making and surrendering into your living spirit? What brings you suffering? What keeps you awake at night? This self-evaluation was the beginning of an on-going process that helped me to stay in touch with the people and their aspirations. "Starting inside ourselves requires a great deal of commitment on our part. The value is that we know who we are, our behavior becomes more consistent and we become worthy of the trust of others" (Lopez, 1995, p.155).

The community needed a leader who was committed to the building up of one another. I clearly understood the words of Spears (1995) that "at its core, servant leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work, in essence, a way of being that has the potential to create positive change throughout our society" (p. 40). I began to connect with the community and its brokenness in a deeply powerful way. My connection had no definition in a job description to explain itself. It was a commitment to the relationships formed in the classroom, in the school, and in the town community. This connection eventually meant that I was no longer a stranger in the car park. I was beginning to belong, to take on the colour of the changing environment, like the chameleon. Foster, as cited in McLaughlin, (2000) has written that "the leader exists only because of the relationship attained with followers and this relationship allows followers to assume leadership, and leaders in turn, to become followers" (p.143).

Despite this connection, there was always an underlying feeling of aloneness and isolation with what was going on inside my head and heart. What was it that I was grappling with in the school community?

*Surely I am not the only person who is trying to sort out the contradictions of teaching in the bush. Is anyone concerned about small communities dying around the little children that are being raised within them?*



*What does the imminent death of the community mean for these young people?*

*Have these young ones the skills and aspirations to do things differently and turn things around?*

*Can the kind of school that I am helping to create be a model to the community of hope and effectiveness?*

*Could this school be recognized as an effective learning community?*

*Will this school be allowed to survive in a climate of rationalisation?*

*Personal Journal Jotting, 1999*

The economic rationalism that was shaping the social, economic and political climate of the time was causing me to struggle with the issue of purpose, and took me on a lonely path of leadership. This struggle and tension needs to be placed alongside a strong, positive notion where there was an obvious feeling of hope in the future.

### **Wisdom figure**

I sought out people to respect, those with wisdom and integrity who could prod and probe me until I had the insight for myself. One such wisdom figure was my District Consultant. It was within the confidential protection of this woman that I began to articulate my concerns and fears and the realities for the community. I felt safe enough to express my inner fears of inadequacy and hopelessness within the situation. I never worried about being misunderstood by her. She allayed many of my concerns and fears and helped me to gain an inner confidence and belief. She enabled me the freedom to dream, to take risks and to share my most urgent, private concerns. She constantly reminded me that I knew the community, and I, as leader, was the most appropriate person to know what was needed. She empowered me to believe in my inner knowing and to trust in what I believed I should do. A letter received after one such conversation:



*Sometimes as Principal you have to step aside from the system of education that a school is in for a while. Sometimes what the system is expecting of the school can be removed and irrelevant to the life of the school and its community. In your school, I am learning to discern these times and to listen to the school community as it articulates its needs. What is needed of me in my role is to step back now and wait and listen and understand. I am learning that my way of being for your school community is to support and trust you, the Principal in the decision-making with your community. I trust you with this community and know you are the right person, at the right time, in the right place.*

*Extract from letter from educational consultant, 1999*

My consultant was giving me permission to step aside from the system of education I was within. She was recognizing that the school community and its needs were to take precedence over the dictates of a system that would suggest a different approach. She was implying that the power relations inherent in her role as consultant - an 'authority' over me - were being dismantled because of her understanding of the unique needs that the Ferndale situation created.

Due to this 'dismantling', my conversations with my consultant became times of building trust in the relationship, but also building trust within myself. I was becoming clear in my role and beginning to believe in my ability to ensure that the children in my care were to be educated within a strong, educational environment. This environment was to honor the stories of the children and their journeys if they were to become well-balanced members of the community. I grew in developing resilience and hardiness as I dealt with uncertain and troubling times.



My leadership focus was coming from within the classroom, not from the office of an administrator. I was in the classroom each day with my own class, and as I listened to the children first hand, I was feeling the community's pulse. The children became my travelling companions. Like the chameleon, I was changing, as the children became my mentors, and together we learnt about leadership; together we were putting it into practice.

Students are extraordinary teachers. They speak. They constantly tell us how our expectations, objectives, curriculums and instructional strategies affect them. We need to look at our students...our students are our key sources for helping us identify what needs to be done...Often we forget to ask them and we forget to listen to the important messages they bring. (Brown & Moffett, 1999, p.105)

### **Leading staff**

As I worked with the school staff community, I knew that what was needed was “an effective manager of people...who can motivate and provide a sense of mission and purpose” (Nahavandi, 1997, p.11). With the staff, I believed that a dream of a preferred future for the community was vital if we were to have purpose and to give purpose to the community. I invited the staff to find their own potential, to be the most authentic, alive, centred people they could be, but also being aware that “Within the demands of a pervasive and overwhelming profession, finding and managing oneself [was] a challenge” (Loader, 1997, p. 61). As a team we became more reflective and integrated in the way we went about our work. We grew in the belief that we could bring hope and inner fulfillment into the lives of the students and their families. A belief grew that, within the school, there was the opportunity to build a learning community that could develop skills to support the students to live differently and create a life that was enriching and life giving. As Covey (1994) would have it, “By working together, learning from each other, helping each other grow, everyone benefits” (p. 212). The staff began to live Covey's words and began to think of the school as a whole rather than a place for individuality alone. The years of conflict,



disillusionment and hurt were drawn together and some common belief statements were created. My journey within had brought me to a place of clarity.

The school secretary wrote this message on a 'thankyou' card at the end of a the 2001 school year:

*No longer am I an appendage. I used to come, do my work and then leave. Going to school was like walking into another world. Now it's a part of everything else I do. It feels good. It feels right. I don't think I stopped to realize how deeply unhappy I was in my work. I felt incomplete in my work and now I feel everything is complete and together. I know you will keep challenging me but I want that too.*

*Jottings by secretary on a gift-card, 2001*

The word 'appendage' used here is important in analysing these words. No longer was the secretary separate or removed from the school but was feeling that school life helped her feel complete and together. This meant that she was positive around the school, feeling a sense of belonging and worth. Her sense of 'walking into another world' would have been similar for the parent community. They had felt suspicious and removed from the structures and system of education that their children were part of for a long time.

The teacher wrote:

*You couldn't have arrived at a better time. I needed someone like you to come into my life. You've been my mother eagle. You've taught me how to be for the kids. Thankyou for your wisdom, reassurance and steadfast determination to make things better. I know I am now a better teacher and a better person.*

*Jottings by teacher on a gift-card, 2001*



The 'mother eagle' metaphor used held a powerful meaning for me. I had introduced McNally's (1990) 'Eagle Story' to Ferndale and used it often when working with staff and parents to express the 'inner knowing' that was needed in order for support to be given and movement achieved. (See Appendix C: Eagle Story) This teacher welcomed the challenge and grew into a strong, radiant person and a vibrant, astute teacher.

These jottings told me much about what was happening for these people but also for everyone in the school. A strong sense of community, of being there for the 'other', and of working together, had grown. This was a time of great energy and purpose. It was a time for celebration, a time to reflect, to recognize that some sense of balance had been restored. It was a time when peace was restored to my life and work and life seemed integrated. Things felt more connected and hopeful and Loader's (1997) words of "no distinction is made between sacred and everyday events" (p. 7) felt good and were being lived. Although this sense of breakthrough felt good, there were constant reminders for me that there was much work to be done. Often discussions with children and parents went back to a negativity surrounding the way things used to be. This continued to penetrate any good that was happening. I recall speaking to the older students around this time about their negative talk. I took the step to present the children with the current reality, and work to end the constant blame of the past and the disintegration and lack of responsibility it was leading the community towards. That evening I wrote these words:

*Today when talking about behavior that I felt was unacceptable, the kids went back to blaming each other and the past. I told them to imagine themselves in a car – they were all in the car and I was behind the steering wheel. We were going on a journey and we would have to make a decision about the destination as we were driving along. The past was to be put in the boot – always part of our journey, but in a place where it did*





*not make decisions for the journey and never interfering with our decision about the way to go.*

*Personal Journal extract, 1995*

This metaphor of the car presented the children with a powerful mind-picture of themselves being on a journey. The car metaphor was the vehicle I used to explain simply what community meant for them at that time: we were all together in the one place, having to decide where we would be travelling to. There was a recognition that the children brought their past with them, but that they were not defined by their past which was an important understanding for them.

This mind picture stayed with those children for years to come and was passed onto their parents. It was joked about at meetings and referred to on my farewell from the community. Lepani's words (1999) seem appropriate at this point in speaking about "the inner path of leadership that we bring forth through our very practical being – how we walk the talk" (p.12). It is "the inner awareness and dynamic mindfulness, the union of the intelligence and the heart and mind that enables one to see the core and whole of the situation and respond appropriately" (Lepani, 1999, p.12). I have no idea where the mind picture came from that day but it was right for that time. It became the conversation whenever there was negativity. We would quickly revisit the metaphor, have a laugh and move on.

### **Looking beyond self**

Despite positive changes that could be clearly evidenced in word and deed, I felt I needed extra knowledge to support myself as a leader in my school. I began to study theories of educational leadership and gradually gained knowledge and understanding of leadership theory. I sought out colleagues I could communicate with, discuss issues and reach clarity. I created time to visit schools of Principals I respected. I felt that by shadowing these people I would find answers for my own situation. One such Principal wrote to me after a visit:



*There are lots of people who have led schools well. Still they have agonized over their leadership till the day they have departed the education scene. I can see you are searching, but my words to you are to do the very best you can from the heart, stay open to taking on new ideas from any and every source, accept your mistakes and learn from them and 'get tough'...I mean stay strong and resilient and don't let yourself become personal in every dealing. Keep reading and learn from others but in the end, you will be your own leader. You will do it different to everyone else. That is the gift and the creativity of leadership.*

*Mentor Principal, 2000*

The wisdom of these words caused me to reflect on my journey. I was constantly looking beyond myself for answers. I thought that if I could 'get it right' all would be well. My mentor Principal gave me the warning of 'don't let yourself become personal in every dealing.' He was warning me to not take everything in the role of Principalship to heart because I couldn't solve all the problems of the world. Like the chameleon, I was taking on colours, in that I was taking on the problems of others – their colours. This wise Principal taught me to keep searching, but to take time to reflect on what was my own leadership story and to respect that there was learning there within it. Zinsser, as cited in Brown & Moffett (1999), although discussing the topic of writing, was able to give me a strong connection for my work in leading. He very aptly writes:

Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is a part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or a craft. Bach and Picasso didn't spring full-blown as Bach and Picasso: they needed models. Find the best writers in the fields that interest you and read their work aloud. Get their voice and their taste into your ear – their



attitude towards language. Don't worry that by imitating them you'll lose your own voice and your own identity. Soon enough you will shed those skins and become who you are supposed to become. (p. 59)

As I was introduced to the varied perspectives on leadership that were part of the literature of the 1990s, I personalized each one of them for my own leadership situation. My intellect and heart, however, connected with the servant leadership paradigm. This paradigm fitted my own inexperienced belief and understanding of what a leader should look like. It aligned itself with what I was trying to be as a leader within the community, and teacher within the classroom. It supported me in my understanding and belief that the community members I worked with were not passive recipients of my leadership, or students recipients of dispensed information. My work focused on relationships and on supporting the community to construct meaning from their lives. My quest was to be like the chameleon, to have the ability and commitment to make the boundaries, the colours between school and life, fluid and permeable.

### **Leading and understanding**

In those early days, I had two parents who would come into the classroom day after day and sit down the back of the room. At first I thought the behaviour very odd but decided to give it time and see what came of it. At least it was a connection with one family. They seemed to be documenting everything that was going on. In time, I would welcome them into classroom each morning and then get on with the business of teaching, oblivious of their presence as I engaged with the children. Eventually they stopped coming. Then, towards the end of the year, I received a card attached to a small Christmas cake. It read:

*We have tried to get listened to in the past but to no avail. Bill was wanting to take the kids out of school but I coaxed him to give you a go because the kids seemed happy since school started this year. I haven't known them like that before. We*



*can see you and the staff care for our kids and all the kids and you know how to teach them. We have appreciated the time and care you have put into their end of year reports. It is obvious that they are all doing good. I worry that you won't stay long with us.*

*Note written on Christmas card by parent 1995*

These words echo the voice of the writer - 'give you a go', 'doing good'. I believe her words indicate a dismantling of the power relations felt between parents and myself - the Principal. This dismantling happened quickly and surely. However, she does echo the fear of the usual transitory history of the staff at the school. This note meant much to me. I realized that the visits to the classroom had a history of mistrust of the school and its part in partnering parents in their role. These parents had felt they were not listened to and they felt misunderstood and had decided that they had no option but to leave the school.

Without knowing it at the time, I had been given a chance to prove myself as an authentic person, deserving of the trust of these concerned parents. I had no idea of the tension within them to find a safe place of learning for their children. They needed to feel they had rights within the school – that it was their school and more importantly that they had the right to some insight into the character and skills of their children's teacher. They were reasonable, concerned parents who gave the school one last chance to be credible in their children's education. In the years that followed, because of the nature of his working away from the community, I only saw the father at end of year concerts. But the mother committed her time and energy to every area of school life over the next ten years, from gardening projects to policy decisions. I grew in understanding that followers are

...the creators of energy. They are the architects of the open moments into which some people must be the first to step...they are the agents who show their leaders where to walk. They are the ones



who validate their leaders stepping out in a direction that has meaning for us all. (Nicoll, as cited in Foster, 1989, p. 60)

As time went on, I found myself considering:

- the way things got done around the school;
- the way people were treated, respected and valued;
- the traditions, rituals that were reflected in behavior;
- the symbols that gave a message to the community; and
- the values and beliefs that were held within the school's mission and vision statements and within the history of the people's lives.

As the school community grappled with everyday problems, I encouraged people to find a meaning and a spirituality for their own lives through sharing the values and attitudes that I myself was searching for. I constantly kept myself grounded in the reality of the community I had come into. A personal written reflection of the School Board Chairperson, shared with me in the early days, was a constant reminder to me of the past and helped to keep me focused:

*After enrolling our first child at Ferndale school, there appeared many examples that the community was not living up to the expectations we had. The sight of parents leaving the school in tears, bullying within the playground and other anti-social happenings were things that we were unprepared for. These episodes and many other experiences only built upon the hurt and anxiety that was already present within the school community. The anger that was building up was expressed in the most inappropriate ways and in the most inappropriate places. This resulted in sending the community into crisis.*



*We noticed changes within our children over time. They became defensive, losing their self-confidence and leading to a general mistrust in anything that was different. We believed that this newly formed attitude was beginning to adversely affect the relationships they had within the wider community beyond the school gates.*

*As the community fell deeper into crisis, it became inward focused. Very little outreach into the community was happening. It was as if the school community was imploding. As with any crisis situation, the need to place the blame became apparent. Within this environment the children became lost and consequently they were the ones left feeling unsafe. This was a community that needed healing. This was a community that needed a change in its culture. This was a community that needed a strong, caring leadership.*

*School Board Chairperson's thoughts, 1995.*

The focus of this reflection is 'community.' Comments regarding the wider community beyond the school gates underscore the particular place and significance of the rural school in rural communities. The strong networks that exist reflect the collective needs and aspirations of the community. At this time, the Ferndale school community was almost closed to its wider community, and had broken many of the networks that come from sharing visions of a collective future.

By the end of the first year (1995), I accepted a contract as Principal for the next six years. The school population doubled within the next few years, thus the direction to prepare the school for closure was withdrawn. My path was set. I understood that tension would be a part of the fabric of the way ahead in Ferndale. Handy (1994) suggested that such tensions are 'endemic' given the complex, uncertain and turbulent world of constant changes in contemporary



organisations. I needed the ethical and moral framework that Fullan (2003) wrote about in his book *The Moral Imperative of Leadership*. What he defined as 'moral imperative' was my greatest support in helping to discern what choices and actions to take. Burns (1978) used different words, twenty years earlier to express ideas similar to Fullan, "...the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led" (p. 17). I had learnt that, inherent in being Principal, is dealing with tension. I had to find within myself a mindset and disposition to be decisive, creative, reflective and most of all authentic to the community and myself. Duignan (2000) identified a number of elements that were needed to be this authentic educational leader. Although not exposed to Duignan's ideas at that particular time, the context of Ferndale had already caused me to grapple with each of the following:

- critically reflective
- intuitively connected
- ethically responsible
- spiritually courageous
- intellectually nimble
- professionally committed
- managerially competent
- strategically ready
- emotionally mature
- culturally sensitive

The journey of inner Principal within me continues to be told within the pages that follow. The journey of the inner Principal is not complete in this chapter - it is only beginning.

### **Summary**

The chapter began with an insight into my own early life to bring a context to the story of myself as teacher/leader. It documents the changing shape of education in the 1990s that caused doubt and tension within me as an educator. The chapter provided an insight into the Ferndale community's reaction to a new leader in the school, one filled with cynicism, scepticism and



suspicion. This was echoed by the children in the way they related to each other within the school. There is a questioning of myself as leader/teacher, as I tried to bring authentic learning to Ferndale, as well as finding an authentic self within the role of Principal.

**The story continues...**

The next chapter explores the notion of the Principal as leader/teacher and leader/learner. It is set firmly within the Ferndale school context, and recognises that quality relationships must be formed in order to create the environment for students to experience deep, meaningful learning for life.





## CHAPTER 6

### TELLING THE STORY

#### THE PRINCIPAL AS TEACHER AND LEARNER



*...the personal belief and character of the teacher influences the efficiency and significance of his (sic) teaching in the souls of the children with whom he (sic) is in daily contact; that he (sic) is not simply a mechanical contrivance for pouring out a stream of knowledge, nor the children mere vessels for containing...what really takes place is the action of one soul upon another, action by sympathy and mutual insight, as well as, or rather, more than by verbal communication ...the effect...is far beyond the power of formal instruction, it is a living product of life and association.*

*---Bishops of Australia 1896*



## **Introduction**

This chapter explores the teaching/learning nature of principalship and recognises that the building of a learning community is imperative if deep, meaningful learning is to take place.

## **Learning to learn**

Learning is life-long and schools must ensure that students know how to learn. I aligned myself with Sarason's views of teaching a learning curriculum to the children of Ferndale. "Thinking about thinking is precisely what children are interested in and excited about" (Sarason, 1982, p.187). Within the Ferndale context, and for that matter any school context, I believed that learning how to learn is more important than learning any given subject matter. It is the 'guts' of preparedness for a future unknown for children. I believed the children needed to be empowered with the knowledge of understanding their own learning. An understanding of the nature of learning was imperative for the school to become a learning community. The school community had to be committed to relevance for the children and that meant that "educators cannot predict the future but they do need to read the signs of the times, paint possible pictures of the future so that they can construct more appropriate forms of school for today" (Stacey & Dexter, as cited in O'Neill, 1999, p. 9).

There was no one best way to support these children or their parents but I knew I could not equip them for their futures through the dispensing of knowledge. I could not predict their futures, but I could become a learner with them. I could search with them how to acquire knowledge, how to be receptive to change, and how to be positive forces in creating futures of hope and worth for themselves and each other. This creative process could not be learned under a curriculum area with its neat goals and outcomes. It could not be evaluated in the term reports or in the cyclical reviews that the education system used to ascertain credibility of schools. I am in agreement with Coombs (1991) who believes that the skills of knowledge acquisition and information gathering are best learned and evaluated by facing everyday problems.



Ferndale presented a myriad of problems every day for the students to work with. These concerns were just outside their classroom doors and were real and relevant to their lives and their futures. However, the curriculum that the students had been engaged with in the past was removed from these realities. The students had the capacity, within their learning community, to do something positive to find solutions to the problems and have some impact on the way things could be lived in their community. While this is not a contemporary quote, I realize that Coombs (1991) certainly had a great understanding of the reality for students and his words were relevant and timely for the students of Ferndale when he wrote that in order

...to provide students with real problems, schools must open their doors to the community. Community resources must be invited into the classroom and students must be actively invited into the community. Local, state, national and international issues must become a significant part of the curriculum. (p. 34)

Chapter 7 has been dedicated to 'Community' which will give some insight into how the classroom doors were opened to the community.

Over time, the culture of the school became part of the town's culture. The positive, alert spirits of the children held the creative process of the town. Care for one another, based on mutual respect and interdependence within the small closely-knit school community, grew. At this time, I met Professor Judith Chapman who had a profound influence on my thinking and understanding. She introduced me to what she called the 'foundations of education,' commonly referred to as the Four Pillars of Education. I then decided that every decision made within the community about the children and their learning needed to be measured against the pillars of education for life: learning to know, learning to do; learning to live, and learning to be (Chapman, 1996, p. 4). I took these 'pillars' as the guide marks for the children's learning, knowing that they would indeed form the framework for truly preparing the children for a life of learning. In my early days in Ferndale it would be true to say that parents probably didn't



have an understanding of all the changes that were happening within the school. But they had learnt to accept change with the constant coming and going of Principals. I didn't want this to continue. I wanted the community to be part of the change process and to feel that the community was responsible for the changes that took place and not feel that they were puppets being manipulated by the Principal marionette holding the strings.

Treston's (1992) symbol of being an 'artist' in Ferndale captured a yearning within my soul as it seemed to answer, in one word, many of the concerns and worries I held – how could I be authentic in the lives of these people when they were filled with scepticism and hopelessness? I knew I could “nurture the imaginations of my students and invite them to reconstruct new symbols in their consciousness of reality” (Treston, 1992, p. 37). But in order for this to happen, I had to work with and through the community. I had to make a commitment to the community to stay with them over time if I was to be truly seen as a member of the community. This was a huge decision for me and my family but it was the only one I could live with.

I began, in 1996, by targetting the School Board. The Board was open to all parents but only four or five parents presented at each meeting. Through being encouraged to attend School Board Induction seminars, the Board members grew in understanding their role and began to take on leadership within the school. They became a forum in which I could process my ideas, providing me with much challenge and emotional debates. The Board became a 'melting pot' for ideas and dreams, and meetings were soon regarded as important events. The group grew and people became clear and articulate in what was happening in the school and more importantly, why. I was able to use the Board as my most powerful means of communicating the school's culture. Before I left the school, almost all families were represented at Board meetings, indicating their belief in the school as theirs, and that they were important members of their school.



As this journey unfolded, I grew in my own picture of education for this community. My own educational thinking had always been centred in the classroom, with my thoughts only on the children in front of me. Becoming Principal gave me a perspective of education that I came to learn and know as the path of the Principal – the Principal I was creating, but not necessarily indicative of the Principals I had experienced, or was currently surrounded by.

I always thought Principals were administrators, overseers, the people who held the purse strings. Perhaps they are but I can't fit that kind of Principal. I'm beginning to become confident in looking at myself differently, in making decisions about money, people, programs and all the rest. I'm not losing sight of the kids' faces. I want to get it right. I know I'm green, raw and I know I'm doing things differently to some of my colleagues. It's hard to stay strong and be clear. But I know there's a place for the way I'm thinking. Even if it is in the corner, I'm still in the room!

*Personal Journal reflection, 1998*

My words, 'administrators', 'overseers', give an indication of what I saw the role of Principal. These words tell of Principals distant from the people in the schools they are meant to be leading. I was recognizing that I was a novice in the role but in spite of this 'green[ness], raw[ness]', I, like the chameleon, could find a colour fitting to my place. I knew "without a thorough grounding in the realities of the classroom, Principals will continue to feel inadequate and uncomfortable in educational leadership roles. Moreover they will continue to lack the credibility in instructional matters with their teachers" (Boyer, as cited in Sergiovanni, 1987, p. 54). Being a teaching Principal helped me to be credible in the community and I worked to ensure that my teaching was a model of good practice.



Despite the many relationship issues within the building of a learning community, I clearly understood that “schools are essentially places for all students to learn” (Dimmock, 1995, p. 274). The quality of a school and hence the quality of the leadership, the learning, teaching and the student outcomes are judged by the core technology - teaching. “The nature of the school’s teaching provides a framework for school leadership and management” (Dimmock, 1995, p. 279). Becoming part of the school’s culture, as reflected in its vision for its students, I needed the sensitivity and the knowledge base to know how to support effectively the teaching and learning in the school. The reason for the school’s existence was learning, and every connection with the children was to create the most effective learning environment, learning styles, climate and resources to support the children in their learning. As Dimmock (1995) would have it: “Teaching is driven by learning, and it responds and reacts to the demands, needs and interests of the learners” (p. 279).

### **Reflection and evaluation**

I continually challenged myself to evaluate the learning for the children, a vital component in the learning process. Rich writes of megaskills which create “the values, the abilities, the inner engines of learning that determine success in schools and beyond” (Rich, as cited in McGilp, 1997). Thinking of the megaskills as inner engines conjured up a picture of students being filled with energy and life for learning and I think that this picture was what Rich wanted to paint, and it certainly fired me with energy to paint the picture. The megaskills of confidence, effort, responsibility, initiative, perseverance, caring, teamwork, common sense and problem solving have all the elements of a good leader and I was convinced that when the students gained these skills, it would be a driving force in creating a hopeful, positive future for them and indirectly for the township and district.

I set about evaluating what was already in place, in order to affirm and celebrate what had happened in the past and to ‘ear-mark’ areas of concern. In aspiring to be a servant-leader, I knew I “must seek a delicate balance between



conceptualisation and day to day focus” (Spears, 1995, p. 6). Goals needed to be created, believed in and dreamed about, but the reality of life for these children in Ferndale was never forgotten. Students and parents were listened to, understood and recognised as partners in achieving the dream, and there was a recognition that the road gets tough and goals fade for a time. But the dream remains.

I worked to inspire the children to value their learning and to see it as a vital link to the future they could create. Their hopes for their futures were not complicated. They held no dreams for an education beyond secondary schooling. Tertiary education had been beyond the reality of the parents and hence not in their thoughts for their children. So, I decided to give the children experiences beyond their community. Distance was my greatest obstacle and the cost of transportation became my constant foe. In order to afford experiences for the children, I acquired a bus licence so I could access the community bus at a reasonable cost. Many children had been no further than their closest regional town – 30 kilometres away. Our first trip was planned to the state capital. This met with much opposition from parents, which I found puzzling. It appears that it came from a genuine fear of what would happen to the children in the large city as it was a foreign place to most of the parents. I had no idea that many of these adults had never been to the city and feared for their own children’s safety. On one occasion, when I was carelessly making a comment about the negative parental reaction, one mother commented to me:

*All I see on the television is knifings and shootings in the city. I’m not prepared to let my kids go down there. It’s too frightening. They’re all I’ve got.*

*Oral Parent comment, 1997*

This mother’s comment expressed the insulated life of many in the Ferndale community. The world beyond was often feared, and the community was seen as a place of refuge and safety. This parent’s comment was a reality check for



me and, in retrospect, it marked the time when I began to 'take on' the community as my own. I began to understand their stories, their realities, without criticism, without my middle-class judgements and values that had kept me one step removed from them up until that time. On that occasion, my husband offered to drive a second bus so that parents could travel with their children and share the experience. As I drove into the city, I was humbled by the awe, wonder and silence in the bus as eyes took in the views of the city. That trip was the first of many that the whole school went on - broadening horizons, opening eyes and coming to a realisation that there was much to be found and learned about beyond Ferndale. On one trip, we travelled to my daughter's university to give some understanding of what a university looks like, and to give the children and their parents some mind pictures to build thoughts upon for their children's futures. We travelled on escalators, in and out of lecture halls, talked to some lecturers and students who had been well-versed on our visit, and shared a meal at the cafeteria. Some of the children on that trip are now at university and I hold the thought that the trip had something to do with this.

One young girl, Esther, sent me an unexpected email when she was in Year 11. I had met Esther as a tiny five year old when she was entering Grade One. I was blessed to spend six years of my teaching life with her. She was full of energy and life and was a well-respected member of the school community. She would often refer to her trip to the university and was determined to be there herself one day. I was very moved when I read this email. The full text can be found in Appendix D: Esther's Email 1. It gives an indication of her memories and feelings about her time at Ferndale.

Twelve months later, I received another email from Esther, telling me of her VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) results and another heartfelt 'thankyou' (Appendix E: Esther's email 2). Esther is now a student at the very university she visited in Grade 5, studying Physiotherapy.





I was evaluating my leadership in Ferndale at a time when there were huge changes in curriculum, and government innovations were creating much change. I always remembered that, first and foremost, I was a teacher and my first responsibility was to the students in my care. As teacher, I needed to know my craft intimately and needed to always be open to changes in theories and the directions my craft took. Being a teaching Principal provided me with the gift of being with the children in the classroom daily, and was my most powerful, leadership learning experience. My dual role of Principal and teacher was recognised by the students, staff and parents, and was a key in breaking down the authority figure in the learning and teaching process, together with being a vital link in the school being a place of care. People had to be valued as people, not as someone's mother, father or as a face in the classroom. At Ferndale, staff members were genuinely interested in the students as people who really mattered.

Teaching and learning was not confined to the children. I aligned my practice to Sergiovanni's (1992) words that "the ideas of making classrooms into learning communities for students will remain rhetoric rather than real, unless schools also become learning communities for teachers" (p. 42). He applies the same principles to teachers as he does to students in classrooms. He believed that for teachers to work in a learning climate, the professional development offered to them would need to emphasise exploration and discovery. Schaefer, as cited in Sergiovanni, (1992) stated "if our aim is to help students become long-term learners by cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the capacity for inquiry, then we must provide the same conditions for teachers" (p. 44).

My task was to challenge the staff to present students with new possibilities, new ways of looking at their world, breaking through constrictive mindsets and "re-imagining a world which empowers people to live with dignity" (Treston, 1992, p. 37). Together, we imagined a different school in Ferndale. In order for this imagining to be real, the staff had to commit to knowing the people so that their stories could be told and their dreams could be dreamed. To do this, one



must be a 'companion on the journey' – fellow travellers who become exposed and vulnerable and challenged as they engaged in the life of the students. There was a renewed energy as the catch phrase 'making a difference' took on a life of its own in this context.

Palmer (1998) recognised the vital nature of the relationships the teacher has with the self.

Face to face with my students, only one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this "I" who teaches – without which I have no sense of the "Thou" who learns...Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. (p.10)

This concept required much inner work for the staff community in coming to know themselves and being vulnerable with each other. One staff member expressed this to me when we were having the Annual Arms (Annual Review) Meeting which was an occasion for reflecting over the past year and on creating goals for the next twelve months.

*I never expected that teaching kids would take me so deep into my own self. I'm finding that I have been taken to a place between joy and chaos in who I am and why I do what I do. I am seeing myself through different eyes, seeing myself in a new way, rejoining my splintered parts.*

*Oral comment from staff member at Annual Review meeting, 2001*

This staff member was trying to express how she was living life differently to what she had known in previous years. She felt that school was taking her within herself and calling her to question her own life. She had held the perception that teaching was the task of imparting knowledge, information and skills. Over time, this staff member undertook a journey within, and set herself on a course of self-discovery which enhanced who she was to self and to the



children. She seemed to recognise in her own life what Palmer (1998) wrote about:

Inviting themselves personally involves being 'centred' people – knowing who they are and being balanced and integrated in their lives. This involves knowing the self and having a unity and coherence in their lives...a vision of who they are and a reaffirmation of one's own belief in the self. To make a professional invitation to the self requires taking steps to be informed, up to date through 'reading, relating, reflecting and researching (p.112).

Inviting oneself professionally is an invitation to develop networks among colleagues to assist in the process of continual learning and enhancement in professional competence. All this had to go hand in hand with the time to reflect, to catch up on what was learnt and 'taking it home' so that it had meaning and relevance in one's life. The staff became very close at this time, both personally and professionally. Being a small group certainly supported this connection, one that is still very much alive even though we have left Ferndale.

I found I needed to be clear about all my educational intentions and practices in Ferndale as the teachers looked to me for guidance and support. I worked to support any programs and structures that were concerned with creating an environment where students were nurtured to function fully as citizens in the world. Within the small school, together we created classrooms of learning, excitement and passion where the children became empowered to be life-long learners and thinkers. We no longer accepted the traditional classroom notion where teaching was seen as a "technical occupation of skilled doers and the school seen as the distribution centre for knowledge" (Sergiovanni, 1987, p.112). We worked to create classrooms that attempted to meet the needs of the students in their rapidly changing world. Lovat & Smith's (1995) challenge to "reverse the disconnectedness of the present world and to develop a curriculum that is not separate of knowledge from life and being, but upon their inherent unity and integration" became the benchmark that we measured our



work against (Lovat & Smith, as cited in Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth & Robbins, p. 48).

Although half a century has passed since Schaefer (1967) expressed his thoughts, his writings are still relevant for today. He had a vision for transforming teaching. He believed that for schools to be relevant learning communities for students, teachers and communities today, there must be a 'dramatic change in mindset'.

For learning communities to be established, classrooms and indeed schools must be transformed. Classrooms must become environments that create learning for life where students are able to reflect on who they are as learners, on their different modes of learning, their differing rates of learning with different talents and interests. Classrooms must be conducive to dialogue where students and teachers discover and learn together, where there is respect for each other in the learning/teaching process and where there is a responsibility among every member of the community to be part of the betterment of the community and for the long term development of each member as responsible citizens within it. (p. 42)

These words became a mission statement for myself and the staff. They could be seen on the staffroom wall and we used them as a measuring stick for our own evaluation process. The learning process had no room for hierarchy between my colleagues and myself. There was only room for team-work, where people planned and worked together, struggling to create the best possible learning environment for the children in our care. This required my working to break down any inherent attitudes about 'the Principal' and any barriers that existed regarding inexperience. Relationships developed and broadened into strong professional and personal bonds, which strengthened the level of work and relationship within the school community. Working at the grass roots with my colleagues, sharing the vision, and being open to scrutiny tested my integrity, and was an experience that strengthened my belief in the



power of servant leadership. We gained the respect of the parent community as we tried to give life to Schaefer's (1967) vision for transforming teaching to a "profession of skilled thinkers", and the school itself "converted to a centre of inquiry – a producer as well as a transmitter of knowledge" (p. 96).

### **Summary**

The chapter explored the changing nature of teaching and learning, recognising that a thinking curriculum is vital for students to construct meaning for themselves in their uncertain futures. It recognised that current schooling must be challenged and changed if education is to be relevant to students. The chapter explored how a relevant, engaging curriculum empowered the children, in spite of their isolation, disadvantage and rural landscape. The chapter recognised the challenge that the building of this kind of learning community was for the staff and parent community.

### **The story continues...**

Chapter 7 broadens the perspective of leadership to the wider community and to the role of the Principal in connecting the school to the community. It explores the reality for the rural community and its connection with the students of the school community. This connection shaped, in a unique way, the role of the Principal in Ferndale and the relationship formed between the Principal and the community.



## CHAPTER 7

### TELLING THE STORY

#### THE PRINCIPAL IN COMMUNITY



*Leadership is not the private reserve of a few charismatic men and women. It is a process ordinary people use when they are bringing forth the best from themselves and others. What we've discovered is that people make extraordinary things happen by liberating the leader within everyone.*

\_\_\_\_\_Kouzes & Posner, 2000, p. xxiii

## **Introduction**

*Community* is a concept with a long history of use and debate in the social sciences. 'Community' is used in this study as a reference to the collectivity of the people living within the particular locality of Ferndale who share, to varying degrees, common interests and identification with the locality and its inhabitants.

This chapter documents the unique connection between the Ferndale school and its community. Through the community's stories, it is obvious that this connection is life-giving and enduring.

Although schools have generally played an active role in rural communities, they have often been constrained by educator and community expectations that limit learning opportunities within the parameters of the school walls and textbooks. I certainly understood these limitations from my experience of working in schools for two decades prior to working in the Ferndale community. The experience of these years did not equip me with a strong understanding, or a knowledge base, of how I would need to lead the school community to form strong partnerships that would support the school and the wider rural community.

## **Turning to research**

Research into social capital in rural communities, conducted by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (CRLRA), suggests that quality interactions and relationships formed between the community members and the school community over a period of time influence the social and economic outcomes of those communities (CRLRA 2000; 2001). Frequent interactions that have a shared purpose and that involve the people in learning about themselves and each other, are most likely to build social capacity. This research supports my lived experience of working in the Ferndale rural community for ten years. I learnt that the most important part of my work in community was the building of relationships. These relationships enabled people to build their community, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit

the social fabric of that community. A sense of belonging, and a concrete experience of working with and for each other, created trust and tolerance and brought great benefits to people. From this sense of trust grew shared values and expectations within the rural society as a whole. Ferndale school provided many opportunities for interaction within its community, interactions that benefited the school children and the community members in building social capital. Woolcock (1999) identified three types of interaction as important dimensions of school capital. He identified these interactions as:

- Bonding (family)
- Bridging (friends)
- Linking (interactions between those from different social groups)

These three became my entire focus in the building of relationships and indeed community.

### **School-community partnership**

What I have learnt from my own living in a rural community was that effective school-community partnership did not happen by chance. It needed to be carefully planned, and involved a high level of commitment, energy and passion from both the school and the community. Oftentimes the issues that created the partnership were spontaneous reactions to a chaotic situation in the life of the community, such as the news that the local bank was to be shut down. These were often unplanned, unexpected and caused a great deal of chaos and emotional anguish, but the actual commitment to be connected and to create a strong partnership was well thought out and well planned. One such spontaneous reaction to a chaotic situation was when I received a phone call from a student during the school holidays, asking me to come to Ferndale to attend a Council meeting. The community had learned that the meeting's agenda was to close the local swimming pool, save costs and pour these savings into the upgrading of the larger, regional pool. Ferndale children would not be able to access this pool because of distance. When I arrived, the entire school community was waiting. They provided a presence and they needed me



to be their voice. That night, the community kept its pool, and the next day the front page of the local paper read: 'Principal accuses Shire of ripping the guts out of the town - Pool saved from closure'. Educating within this rural community context meant that the school community was focused constantly on these types of unpredictable rural issues, and that I needed to be a partner with the community in the solving of their problems.

Ferndale school was well placed to help build social capital in its rural community.

...schools can foster values for social co-operation as well as providing meeting places where various social networks can intersect...To the extent that teaching methods and organization of learning encourage shared learning and teamwork as well as openness to new ideas and cultural diversity, the more schools can underpin social capital which bridge across different groups in society. (OECD report 2001, p. 46)

My experience of community-based partnership before coming to Ferndale was introspective and insular. It did not spread beyond the confines of my experience, which, in the past, had consisted of inviting community members to teach children to play chess, learn to knit, read to younger children, be involved in the local town celebration or turning up with the children to a civic event. I learnt that the partnership in Ferndale involved fighting for rights, defending community facilities and becoming entrenched in local politics and customs.

As Principal of the rural school community, I held great visions for the building of school community partnerships - for the staff, learning and teaching opportunities for the children, involvement of parents, their families, their community, new methods and models, current research, strategic planning and thinking, and the list continues. A comment by a carer grand-parent at a parent meeting that I was chairing quickly helped me realise my visions were just that – mine. However, the comment brought a sense of reality to my own mindset.

This mindset was intent on bringing a vision and a movement to the school that I knew was needed. This grandmother taught me that I needed to recognize and understand the past reality for the members of the community before I could ever begin to expect a consideration of a visioning process for a school. It began my search to find out what life had really been like prior to my entrance into Ferndale. The unintentional lesson she gave me has been one of the most vital in my life as educator and leader of a learning community:

*It's like a cyclone swept through Ferndale, snatched us all up, threw us around and around and then spat us out after it was finished with us. Where we landed was wrecked and destroyed and we had to forage around and make a new life with what we had left.*

*Oral comment by a 75 year old community member, born and bred in the town, 1997*

This comment certainly stopped me in my tracks and called me to the task of understanding context, time, sensitivity and the reality of life lived. The metaphor of a 'cyclone' is powerful as it conjures up a picture of havoc, of destruction, of everything being uprooted and changed forever. People in a cyclone are thrown around, having no power to control the situation. I had been given a prophetic warning about leadership in a school community, one relevant to leadership in any community. First I had to know about, and more importantly, care about, the reality for the school community. Rather than being a strong business leader or a strong administrative leader, I needed to be a person who was able to understand the past, and then work to develop and nurture genuine, critical relationships within the school community. I needed to blend into the community, like the chameleon, quietly listen to their stories, and understand their journeys before proceeding with any plans and directions I believed were needed. I needed to recognise the sacred nature of the community I was working within and acknowledge that the first task to be done was to develop a sense of community within the school. Sergiovanni (1996) believed that Principals must have the skills to develop and maintain

relationships within community. He gives a definition of communities as “collections of people bonded together by mutual commitments and special relationships, who together are bound to a set of shared ideas and values that they believe in, and feel compelled to follow” (Sergiovanni, 1996, p.100). This is a relevant definition for the small school community of Ferndale now, but was certainly not a relevant definition in my early days there.

### **Building community**

I realized there was much to be done to build community and to build the spirit of community before I could expect people to be enthusiastic about building community partnerships. I hung onto the vision that the school could be a vital component in the development and sustaining of the rural community. I believed the school could become the major provider for community interaction and more importantly, provide the school-community partnerships which could eventually increase the individual and community capacity to influence their own and the community’s future.

At this time in 1996, a number of amalgamations and closures occurred. I had the sense that, through working from within the school, the town could be helped. I felt strongly that the children within the school were my reason to be and I saw my role as one of creating the partnership between child and child, before worrying about school and community. I worked to provide initial and on-going support in terms of promoting within the school an atmosphere of care, respect and trust and provide a school structure that promoted shared, participative decision-making. In beginning my work, I recognised that there was deep hurt within troubled, cynical spirits as parents worried about the future of their children, their school community, and the future of their town. I knew that this communal concern and worry could actually be the connector for me to relate to the community. Prawat, (1992) knew something of this:

Communities are organised around relationships and ideas.  
They create social structures that bond people together in a oneness, and that bind them to a set of shared values and

ideas...create a sense of 'we' from the 'I' of each individual. The bonding and binding is tight enough to transform them from a collection of 'I's' into a collective 'we'. This 'we' means that the members of a community are part of a tightly knit web of meaningful relationships. (p. 104)

I connected with the community in a deeply powerful way that had no definition in a role description but comes close to an understanding of being part of the 'we' that Prawat was speaking about. Members of the community were all connected, dependent, reliant and all part of the same story - connected through their children, connected through the time, the place. The community began to think in terms of the school as a whole rather than individuals within the group. The years of conflict, disillusionment and hurt were drawn together and some common belief statements were worked towards. The members of the school community came together as "companions on the journey and traveled together to a better place" (Spry & Sultmann, 1997, p.143). The school community identified the gap between the vision held for the school and what in actual fact was the reality for the school. The school community had to take a good, hard look at the culture, the daily life of the school, 'the way things are done around here.' In order to do this, an 'inside-out' approach was used that encouraged individuals to focus on their personal beliefs, values and behaviours and then many open discussions followed where they were articulated to other school community members.

### **Building culture**

A pressing concern was the sustainability of the rural community, and indeed the school. This became the primary focus in much of my work. It involved coming to an understanding of the economic, social and environmental aspects that were contributing to the demise of the rural community and my reflecting on how I could build a culture within the school that could bring purpose and meaning to the lives of those within the school and hopefully support the school community as it strove to maintain itself. In this, the school community was my

primary concern and it was important that the following questions were asked and answered:

- What is this school about?
- What is important here?
- What do we believe in?
- Why do we function as we do?
- What makes us unique?

Answering these questions imposed an order on the life of the school that was derived from a sense of purpose and enriched meanings. As Greenfield (1979) states:

What many people seem to want from schools is that schools reflect the values that are central and meaningful in their lives...schools are cultural artefacts that people struggle to shape in their own image. Only in such forms do they have faith in them; only in such forms can they participate comfortably in them. (p. 570)

I believed my task as leader within the school was to create a way of living that bound the whole Ferndale community together. I needed to search for core beliefs and values that the school community and the wider Ferndale community held deep within themselves. I began looking for expressions of

...the complex pattern of norms, behaviours, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organisation. The culture is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act. (Barth, 2001, p. 8)

These provided meaning, certainty, stability, ownership and a certainty to the school community that seemed to be needed. These then became the face of the school in the wider community. Barth (2001) recognised that

To change the culture requires that we be first aware of the culture, the way things are here. This means crafting and using wide-angle, microscopic and telescopic lenses, and honing our skills at observing. What do you see, hear and experience in the school? What don't you see and hear? What are the indicators, the clues that reveal the school's culture? What behaviours get rewards and status here? Which ones are greeted with reprimand? (p. 8)

Sergiovanni (2000) uses the apt metaphor of 'glue' in seeing culture as "the normative glue that holds a particular school together. With shared visions, values and beliefs at its heart, culture serves as a compass setting, steering people in a common direction" (p.1). My particular context broadens Sergiovanni's comment to being a glue for the community in which the school is placed.

The words of these writers resonated with the work I was trying to do, as I was seeing culture in Ferndale as the basic beliefs and assumptions that were being shared everyday in a taken-for-granted kind of way that shaped the whole community. Stoll & Fink's (1996) cultural norms became relevant and vital in my situation and I used them as a set of criteria to evaluate what was actually happening in the school. These norms - shared goals, responsibility for success, collegiality, continuous improvement, lifelong learning, risk taking, support, mutual respect, openness and celebration - said much about what sort of a place a school or any other organisation should look like. They spoke to me of who people need to 'be' to each other, the quality of relationships, the environment, the 'atmosphere' around the place, the attitudes and beliefs, values and the way things are celebrated and evaluated - the culture of the place. These could not be measured in a strict set of outcomes that could be ticked off as they were achieved. If the school was to make sense of itself, then it needed to have a unity of purpose and shared goals and vision. From a recognition of and giving definition to culture, came a vision. This vision needed

to be owned by the community in order to have an effect on creating a different kind of life for the school community than was previously known. By this stage, I had learnt that vision was a fundamental element in working to make the school effective, alive and ever-changing and as stated previously, the culture “is the lens through which we see and engage with the world. It is the great rallying call that captures our most fundamental beliefs and defines who we are and what we stand for” (O’Neill, 1999, p. 8). Ferndale needed to heed this “rallying call.”

I became fascinated by the power of culture and the creation of a shared vision and my part in it all. From my research, I could see that, by the 1970s, educational administration had moved towards an interpretive/humanist outlook that emphasised schools as living organisations with unique features that were determined by time, place and history. Writers began exploring the perspective of culture when referring to the school organisation. The word ‘culture’ was used to define the social uniqueness of a school community. The ‘stuff’ of culture included a school’s customs and traditions, historical accounts, stated and unstated understandings, habits, norms and expectations. Within this tradition it was acceptable that schools have intangible, symbolic elements, such as values, philosophy and ideology. The effective school was seen as a “concentrated culture based upon a core assumption about its prime function, instruction and learnings” and “comes from a collectivity of people who have derived a collective vision” (Beare, Caldwell & Millikan 1989, p. 6). No longer was the school seen to be static and unpredictable. People were valued for what they could individually bring to the organisation. Stoll and Fink (1996) place great importance on the relationship between the culture of the school and the type of students it produces. It influences students’ morale and self-concept and creates “active involvement and responsibility on the part of the students” (p.16).

The culture of the school was all encompassing of the town. The culture became the guiding context within which the children were able to learn and be

prepared for life. I am with Sergiovanni (1996) when he writes that “To develop this culture of learning, I needed to connect parents, teachers and students morally to each other and to their responsibilities as defined by shared purposes” (p. 83).

Ferndale became a real community, not a ‘counterfeit community’ where the language in vision and mission statements was given the label of community. The Ferndale community put years of hard work into becoming “well-informed, well-intentioned and well-educated to interpret the common interest” of all (Handy, 1994, p.51). Interdependence and mutual cooperation became the fabric of the community of Ferndale. This required the community to think community, believe in community and practice community – to change the basic metaphor for the school itself to community. “We are into authentic community when community becomes embodied in the school’s policy structure itself, when community values are at the centre of our thinking” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p.xiii).

### **Time for stock-take**

During my time as Principal, I was required to undergo a mid-contract review. Students, staff, parents and community members were surveyed by the Education Office of the region. The following written comment provided me with an insight into what was important to the community in evaluating their Principal.

...to achieve such results in the community, a completely different style of leadership was brought in everything that was done. She led from within the community, not asking for any more than she was prepared to give. Her leadership was strong, filled with compassion, empathy and love for the children within her care. She approached each day with the belief it was a privilege to be entrusted with the care and the responsibility for the education of the most precious members of



the community of Ferndale. She lived out this fundamental belief in every thing she did. I believe that being congruent to this ethos was the hallmark of her leadership.

A key component I thought that was so important in the leadership was ensuring that each child felt safe within the community. The concern for the children's welfare was the primary focus. Every day the children went to school full of enthusiasm in the knowledge that the school was a safe place for them.

*Written comment by parent, taken from Principal mid-contract appraisal, 1999*

I believe the most telling word in this comment is the word 'safe'. What is understood here is that the school held a wholistic view of education where children were educated in an environment that worked towards achieving a shared vision of physical and emotional safety and wellbeing for its students. Although at the time of this parent's comment, the National Safe Schools Framework had not been written, I believe this document gives definition to what I understand the parent was meaning. 'Safe' recognises the need for sustained positive approaches that include an appreciation of the ways in which social attitudes and values impact on the behaviour of students in the school communities. Such approaches encourage all members of the school community to:

...value diversity; contribute positively to the safety and wellbeing of themselves and others; act independently, justly, cooperatively and responsibly in school, work, civic and family relationships; and contribute to the implementation of appropriate strategies that create and maintain a safe and supportive learning environment.

([www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/-resources/natsafeschools-file.pdf](http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/-resources/natsafeschools-file.pdf))

While the culture and vision of the school were becoming strong, and people were certainly bonded in common concern for their children, their school and their community, I still felt alone and isolated with what was going on inside my

head and heart. I read and reread the works of many authors on the subject of effective schools, life-long learning, leadership, the artistry of teaching, theories of learning and student leadership, but despite this, I still had much anguish within me for the children and their lives in their community. I believed strongly that the collective, positive energy of the children could bring hope and new life for the town and eventually make a difference in the lives of the children. I believed that what I was grappling with was valuable but it held vast unknown spaces for me as I asked myself the questions:

*What is it that I am grappling with in my school community? Will the effective school debate make a difference to the lives of those within my school community? Surely I am not the only person who is trying to sort out the contradictions and economic disadvantages of teaching in the bush. What does the imminent death of a community mean for these children? Have these young lives the skills and aspirations to do things differently and make life different? Can the kind of school that I am hoping to build be part of be a model of hope and effectiveness to the community it is within? Can the school be recognised as an effective learning community? What should leadership look like in such a community...can it be identified, defined?*

*Personal Journal jotting, 1998*

This jotting was written at a time of frustration for me in my work in Ferndale. During the 1990s, educational discussions generally involved debating the issue of what makes an effective school. Edmond's (1979) model of the effective school encompassed five correlates: [1] school climate; [2] leadership; [3] teacher expectations; [4] purpose; and [5] student progress assessment. This model found currency at that time and is still relevant today. At the time however, I was feeling that the education research world was removed from the Ferndale reality. The isolation, poverty and deprivation of experiences seemed

all encompassing and I was struggling to relate the Ferndale context with the determinants for an effective school. I was constantly reading about, or being involved in, discussions about what made an effective school. Yet, I battled with the thoughts of communities dying around the small children who were being raised within them. Beare's (1993) thoughts were aligned with my own as he believed schools should teach the disciplines as a coherent whole and not as a 'bits and pieces approach.' He believed that curriculum had to be relevant and connected to the learner, and for me in this community, I could see no way of teaching other than engaging the children in their real life dramas within the Ferndale community and its stories.

### **Learning community**

The classrooms of Ferndale began to embrace the concept of a learning community. I believed the learning community needed to comprise members who respected and trusted each other. As part of the building of community within and outside the school walls, the children were called to be leaders. This leadership was not that of the prefect system, nor similar to a peer support program, or the other leadership programs in most schools. This was a call for the young people of my school to take an active role in ensuring that the community survived. Not only this, they were also called to charge the community with passion and fire for the future of the town that was 'going out of business.' They were being called to be active citizens within their community and to deal with issues that are generally left for another generation. They were called to support the community in its struggles to survive, and this had a huge impact on the life of the school and of the children's experience of school. It had huge implications on the way of life within the classroom, impacting on the way teachers taught, students learnt, parents understood and the Principal led. Somewhere in this was the evolution of the learning community of Ferndale. A 'community of learners' mindset is concerned with culture, interpersonal relationships and the nature and quality of the learning experiences. This mindset became reality for my students in their community.

I constantly found myself justifying, within myself and within the education system, the very existence of the school and the reality of life for its children. The notion of students as leaders in their rural community challenged me to constantly question what was actually happening in the school and within the community and to be open to a curriculum far beyond the Curriculum Standard Framework document for primary schools (<http://vcaa.vic.edu.au/prep/10/csf/index.html>). Sergiovanni (1996) argued that sustainable school improvement efforts revolve around the concept of the school as a community rather than an organisation, and noted that an outcome of community building in schools is strengthening of other community institutions such as the family and the community. He proposed that schools should become a community of leaders in which leadership is defined as “the exercise of wit and will, principle and passion, time and talent and purpose and power in a way that allows the group to increase the likelihood that shared goals will be accomplished” (p.170). In support of this view, Lambert (1998) argued that educational leadership is a reciprocal learning process amongst people who share goals and visions. The children needed to take charge of their world, become leaders in their world and be part of creating a future for themselves. The children needed to take on leadership roles within their community involving the creation of a school that was different from what had been school in Ferndale in the past. It was about helping in the formation of intelligent people who could confront the problems around them, search out options, and choose solutions for themselves. These children needed to see learning as a life-long process that they were committed to. As they were exposed in a very direct way to a huge amount of human problems and the human condition, they needed to use the interrelationships they had as the raw material for their own understanding of human beings and what made them tick.

### **Stories from Anna and Jack**

Anna, who became part of the school because of her involvement with the children in their Red Cross work, stood up and spoke at the Regional Red Cross Annual General Meeting. This region accounted for the South-West

region of the State. Anna's intention was to thank the Ferndale children for keeping the organization going in the Ferndale area. Her story entered into her personal life, and, with great vulnerability, she told the story of the impact the children had on her life the day her farm was sold. Although gravely ill and having a feeble voice, her story was clearly heard by a hushed audience of elderly people.

*The day my farm was auctioned I was broken. I couldn't watch the hammer come down on it. I didn't know what to do so I decided to go to the school and be with the children. I knew that would take my mind off things. All day, they looked after me and my dog Clancy (the only remaining remnant of my life on the farm). That day the children were my life-line. Nothing much was said about the selling of the farm but I knew the older ones knew why I was at school. They said nothing, but looked after me all day like I was a treasure. Time has moved on, the farm sold and I have settled into life in the town. But I'll not forget the kids and what they did for me. These children stand for the true meaning of the Red Cross Organization and we can learn much from them about how to do things.*

*Anna addressing the Red Cross Annual General Meeting, 2002*

Anna's account tells of the economic realities of rural family lives. A reality for Anna, like many others, was that she had to walk away from the land, her home, her life. It was obvious that the children had a sensitive understanding of what was happening to Anna at this time as they treated her like a 'treasure.' That day was a momentous one for her, as would be the case for other rural families facing economic ruin. The children were constantly exposed to the reality of lost dreams in their community and thus were able to empathise with Anna's story.

As shown by Anna's story the children connected on a personal level with their elderly friends. It would be easy to fill these pages with moving stories of relationships formed within the community, but I would find difficulty in representing them with the sincerity, integrity and honour that they deserve. The story of Jack is one example that captures the meaning behind many of the stories that occurred regularly, showing the connection and the commitment built within the community. Jack had been part of the community his whole life. He had lost everyone in his family and when it was his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, the children decided to give him a big party. At the party, Jack told all his old friends what the children meant to him:

*They are all my friends. They know me. When I go down the street I hear, 'Giddy Jack' and its one of the kids from school. It makes my day. I know them all by name. They are the reason I get up every morning. I don't know what I'd do without them.*

*Jack's words to his friends 2000*

The story of the children becoming leaders within their township has been one of much heartache and much joy. The children of the school breathed life into their town and although young, the strong sense of school community was seen to be the core of the town community. It was from within the school that ideas come and it was from within the school that structures were set in place. "Students, even little ones, are people too. Unless they have some meaningful role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education will fail" (Fullan 2000, p.137). These words say something of the impact that the children had on the community and the value they brought to the community. What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools?' The answer to this question has been found in the Ferndale story where the children, in partnership with the community, sought out how to create a school that would bring life, learning, and meaning to the lives of its members.

The students of Ferndale were confronted with issues just outside their classroom doors, as noted in the extract from Anna. These issues were real and relevant to their futures. They had the capacity within their learning community to do something positive in an attempt to find solutions to the problems and have some impact on the way their lives could be lived. The school was now seen as the place where ideas were generated and disseminated throughout the community. The ageing Ferndale community looked to the school for its support both now and in the future. This support by the children created much of the fabric that was called 'curriculum' and 'life' in Ferndale. (Appendix F, tells the story of Arthur, another much-loved, old friend.)

### **Visits to the nursing home**

The children regularly visited the nursing home. This is a usual occurrence for many school groups who provide entertainment to the senior citizens in their communities. But these children actually attended to the needs of these people, providing support to the nursing staff. Many residents had been relocated to the rural nursing home because of lack of beds in their home city or regional centre. The children spent many hours connecting with these people, listening to their life stories, feeding them, and providing support that families would normally give. Due to the isolated nature of the community, many of these supports were not present. The children learnt to deal with the issue of aged care, loneliness and isolation and it was from this connection that a technology driven initiative developed, whereby the children recorded the oral history of their community. They saw the need for the history to be recorded as they learnt to recognise and appreciate the stories of their heritage and worked to bring these stories into a living history. The positive, alert spirits of the students held the community's hope, leading to the 'Keepers of the Story Project.'

### **‘Keepers of the Story’ project**

A project initiative called ‘Keepers of the Story’ was created (Appendix G: Keepers of the Story). It deserves mention here because it was a living, vibrant example of the community in action, where the children captured something precious for the community, created an environment where their stories were listened to and recorded for the community in the future. It marked the beginning of a strong relationship forged through the children working to ‘get to know’ the ‘oldies’ within the community. On the surface, the children recorded stories and creatively published the stories. But below the surface, learning that was authentic was taking place. It was creative, purposeful and involved opportunities for them to discover, take risks and learn actively through technology. Students developed their appreciation of the past, present and the future through their involvement in this initiative.

The project initiative was based on the belief that young people have the ability to share their joy in life with senior citizens and that they have the ability to access the depth of resources within the hearts and minds of these people. The project involved the children in audio-taping, transcribing, editing, photographing, creating a web page and creatively publishing the stories of people’s lives. It captured the essence of community school partnership by ensuring that learning was relevant and was positively supported by the community. The children took risks and made decisions about their community and grew in self-confidence, self-esteem and in commitment to the community. There was community pride and an added depth of understanding of the nature of learning within the community. The project initiative demanded team-work and the final outcome rested on the building of trust as students recognized the value of storying in understanding the way people live their lives. The children were exposed in a very direct way to the problem of the aged in their community and to the pain of a rural community in these changing times. They were able to confront problems, search out options and choose solutions for the betterment of their community.



In many schools, topics need to be created to cause awareness in the children regarding Civics and Citizenship. But for the children of Ferndale, they were not merely studying a Civics and Citizenship unit, they were linking their past, present and future together to bring sense and meaning to their lives, and thus they opened their classroom doors to a broad, relevant curriculum. Documenting the stories of the community of Ferndale, particularly for future generations, was recognized as something sacred, and the children learnt to value their own life, and place themselves firmly in Ferndale's history.

Through the connection made during this project initiative, the children and their beloved 'oldies' continued to relate to each other in a very powerful way.

### **Citizenship in action**

Children became the Meals on Wheels<sup>4</sup> of the town, taking it in turns to organise the community members to help. The students became regular visitors to the aged care facility in the town, invited the elderly residents to the school often, became active Junior Red Cross members, managed to do Meals On Wheels during their school hours on a rostered basis, worked hard on any community projects and were present at the burial ceremonies of their beloved friends, as well as keeping up contact with the often lonely, loved ones left behind.

One strong expression of this caring for those left behind is found in a letter sent to the school by Anna after her husband's death:

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<sup>4</sup> Meals On Wheels is a community resource whereby meals are prepared and delivered at a nominal cost. In Ferndale, there were not enough people to do the deliveries so the children were the rostered providers of food for the elderly in the community. They organised their parents and community members to drive them to the nursing home to obtain the meals and then take them to their friends around the town each day.

*Dear Staff and Students of Ferndale,*

*I write to thank you for coming to visit me. Since Jakob died I have been lost. When I saw you coming over that day, the first thing I thought was I had no cordial for you. Don't take this wrong, but I didn't want to go out and meet you. When I walked out on to that decking all I could see was the big hole in it that Jakob was always going to fix. I didn't know what to say to you all. Then you just gathered round me. I remember being in the middle of you all...no one spoke and we all just stood there with your arms around each other's shoulders. 'Give her one of our hugs,' I heard Zac say. I don't know how long we were there like that but it was wonderful. I can't believe it really happened. Then you just went back to school one by one...not a word was said...even the little ones were quiet. Do you know I stood on that decking for about half an hour after you left. It was then I decided that things had really changed and I had to make a go of it. All I was doing was grieving for Jakob and nothing else. Since then I've got into the garden and I'm back with the ladies at Red Cross and the hospital. Thank you for what you did for me. I know you all loved Jakob and miss him too. He loved you all and couldn't wait for the times he was with you in the school. I bet you'll miss him at the carols. He always loved thanking you for your item. I'll never forget what you did for me. I love everyone of you. You got my life going again.*

*Anna*

*P.S. I'm sorry this thankyou took so long, but everything takes a long time now, but I'm getting there. See you all at your concert. I'm so looking forward to it.*

*Anna's letter to the children after Jakob's death, 2000*

Anna and Jakob lived opposite the school and were close friends to the children. Anna's husband Jakob died of a massive stroke and she did not return



to her home for many weeks after the funeral. When the news came of her return, the children were keen to visit. I, like Anna was amazed at the reaction of the children when they met her. The sense of respect and deep, overwhelming sadness that was within the group was almost able to be touched. These children knew that words were meaningless, so did not waste them. The younger children took their unsaid prompts from the older ones. The whole school embraced this elderly lady's grief, silently shared their own with her, and then left without a word being said.

It was the most memorable encounter with children I have ever experienced - one I will never forget. It was a time when I stopped and recognised that within this group of young people, forces were at work that were deep and powerful and that were akin to deep learning...a deep knowing. The forming of strong, genuine, sincere relationships with those in the community had become very much part of the life of the school. This had come with no firm 'action plan.' It had come out of the way the school community was beginning to live. I believe that a

...transformation of consciousness is what took place and as a result of that, a transformation of social conditions. But this required a community of believers, not just a leader. Certainly one person helped to serve as a catalyst, but if the full story be known, such transformations occur because of a community of believers. (Foster, 1989, p. 52)

Somewhere in this story the children had learned about community and true citizenship. What was at work here was something more powerful than curriculum. It was the reality of a learning community, one that was grounded in human values of love and compassion and one that had the capacity to run with the ebb and flow of life, not be disjointed and separate from it. Palmer (1998) understood what was happening to the community of children:

An authentic learning community is not just compatible with solitude; it is essential to a full realization of what the inner teacher is trying to

tell us. In a community that respects the mystery of the soul, we help each other remove impediments to discernment. Given certain sensibilities and safeguards, nourished and protected by a teacher, a learning community can help us see both barriers and openings to the truth that lives within us. (p. 77)

### **Connection and death**

The children were connected to their elderly friends in a unique way, especially at the time of death. The children, often the closest community members to some of their elderly friends, formed guards of honour for them and carried them to their grave sites. The entire community supported the children as they farewelled their friends.

A day, vivid in my mind was the day the children buried their old buddy, Kennie. Kennie, saw the school community as his family. Every day he would be at school in his checked shirt and straw hat. Ben, a Grade 6 boy had a particular kind of close relationship with Kennie. To Ben, Kennie was a person he trusted with his innermost thoughts, tensions and dreams. On the day of Kennie's funeral, Ben wrote:

*We buried Kennie today. I kept my head down as they carried him past me. Even the little kids stood straight and never spoke. Kennie was my mate. I can't imagine him not coming to school. You'd see him through the window with a big grin on his face. He spent lots of time in school and he would cook us pancakes on pancake day. He was roly-poly and great fun. I can't believe he's gone.*

*Ben, Grade 6 boy speaking after Kennie's funeral, 2002*

It is significant that Ben uses the term 'mate' when describing Kennie. 'Mate' is a word usually addressed to one's peers. But this is a particular use of the word, as Kennie represented a grandparent figure, the person who was

trustworthy and reliable, who could be depended on, the person who listened; the close confidante and friend. Kennie always understood how valued he was and was protective of the children and sensitive to their needs.

### **Connection and the environment**

In being responsible citizens, the school found a voice for the environment. The children were often called into the political arena as they tried to have an impact on the local Shire Council's policies. There were no policies for waste minimisation and the children's voices were not heard at Shire level. But the rural school, working in partnership with the community, had a positive impact on the local environment, working side-by-side on environmental issues of waste reduction, revegetation of waterways, salinity and soil erosion. They were also involved in beautification of the town landscape. The school community called the council to task on its lack of recycling in the town and became a model for the towns-people in the environmentally friendly way the school was operated. The school won a state award as Rubbish Free School of the Year 1999, and, with funds received, developed a vegetable garden and a worm farm, eventually becoming a model of best practice and policy in the area for other schools to learn from. Environmental projects provided adults in the community the opportunity for personal development and skill acquisition through involvement in school activities. As the community created opportunities for tomorrow's rural leaders to emerge, responsible young citizens were developed.

The National Taskforce on Rural and Remote Education by the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) asserts that "the needs of rural and remote students should be met through local commitment and ownership" (2001, p. 6). A key focus of the Taskforce was on building capacity through school-community partnerships. Rural community development is about allowing rural communities to take control of their future by recognizing and fostering the development of existing community capacity. By the time I left the community, I knew that it was a place that had

taken control of its future, holding each community member in high regard, supporting those who needed support and celebrating each other's achievements.

### **Connection and the self**

The children had learnt how to interact in an honest way with each other and were able to organise their lives around the values of respect for the dignity of each other. An inner self-responsibility had crept into the school, modelled by the older children until it became the culture of the school. The care, respect and understanding between the children were often commented on by the outside community. After an excursion to a historical building in the state capital, a note was included on a receipt from the tour guide which recognised the spirit that I am writing about.

*...never in all the years that I have taken student tours throughout the goal, have I ever encountered a more thoughtful caring group. The way the older students looked after the younger ones was a credit to the teachers. I watched one young man constantly staying behind to make sure the group was together and another who was helping a young girl with a limp manage the stairs. When there weren't enough seats, small children just casually sat on older ones knees. The children were well prepared for the tour, had interesting, inquiring questions and were well-mannered. I often have groups who are rude, disinterested and show no respect for each other, getting their fun from pushing, tripping, nasty comments and inattention. The group have restored my faith in young people and in their interest and respect for the history of our country.*

*Historical building tour guide's written comment on the school's invoice, 2003.*

This tour guide, experienced in working with groups of school children, had recognised a community in action. He noticed thoughtfulness, a caring attitude and a 'looking after' each other. This comment occurred almost nine years after another outsider had written about the behaviour of the Ferndale school children (comment by anonymous author, p. 67). These disparate comments, differentiated by time and context, are a clear indication of how far the school community had travelled. The children had been part of the building of a very different culture to what had been known in the past in Ferndale school.

The Ferndale community had indeed been shaped by the creative movement of renewal - the "co-creative task of being and becoming" (O'Murchu, 1997, p.76).

### **Pastoral care**

During the first year in Ferndale, a directive came from the education office that a review of all pastoral care documents was to be held, and that schools without such a document were to create one. This outside directive provided a catalyst for renewal in the Ferndale school. As "pastoral care is concerned with enhancing the stories and hopes of the members of the school community" (Treston, 1997, p. 3), it was an important, vital document to begin my work with the people of Ferndale. This began the "journey of discovery that begins when members of the school community identify gaps between vision and reality" (Spry & Sultmann, 1997, p. 21). It began the process of renewal that gave the community hope in the future of their school.

Clarifying the meaning of pastoral care within the school community created a partnership between students, parents, staff and the wider community of Ferndale. The community became empowered to pool its talents and expertise and work together to achieve its goals. Respecting what had already gone before was important in recognising what was happening was part of the cycle of life within an organisation. What was already happening, or what had happened, was celebrated as being fruitful and life-giving. This was an important step in the change process. Students and parents were listened to,

hopefully understood and recognised as partners in achieving the dream of a positive expression of the belief in the human person. Differences within the community were recognised and a context that encouraged openness to difference was created. Parents were connected through a deep reliance on each other. The community began to think in terms of the school as a whole, rather than individuals within the group. The years of conflict, disillusionment and hurt were drawn together and some common belief statements about pastoral care were worked towards.

The shared vision had the effect of creating a different kind of life for the school community. As Covey (1994) would have it:

The passion created by shared vision creates a synergistic empowerment. It unleashes and combines the energy, talent and capacities of all involved. Creating shared vision produces its own order, trying to control produces the opposite effect – dysfunctional disorder or chaos. (p. 219).

Pastoral care had to come from this shared vision of the community, had to take shape and be lived out in the community. The story of pastoral care had to come from a community where people could feel they belonged and where there was an atmosphere of care, reconciliation and support. This could not just happen. It meant that much time and energy had to be put into working towards clear goals – goals coming from a shared vision where the needs of individuals were balanced with the aspirations and endeavours of the whole community. This required the creation of a school culture that promoted networking and bonding between individuals who had experienced much pain within a divisive web of relationships in the past.

### **Summary**

The chapter recognised the unique relationship between the school and the wider community of Ferndale and the Principal's role in this. It explored the creation of a school vision - a culture that 'glued' the community to itself, and



gave the school a clear mission. The stories within the chapter defined the school community's connection to the wider community, especially to the senior citizens of Ferndale.

**The story continues...**

Chapter 8 explores the impact of change in the rural community, recognising the unique problems and realities for a remote, disadvantaged community and how the school became a positive agent for change.

## CHAPTER 8

### TELLING THE STORY

#### THE PRINCIPAL WITHIN CHANGE



*To cope with a changing world, any entity must develop the capability of shifting and changing, of developing new skills and attitudes: in short the capability of learning...the essence of learning is the ability to manage change by changing yourself - as much for people when they grow up as for [schools] when they live through turmoil.*

-----De Gues, 1997.



## **Introduction**

At the beginning of this research, I defined my purpose as an exploration of my own experiences of leadership within the context of a rural community. This chapter provides my insights into the role of Principalship, that I now firmly believe can be applied to all aspects of leading, in any context.

I entered into the Ferndale environment with my own story of inner questioning, as I felt that what was vital to the teaching of children was somehow being lost in the changed educational agenda of the time. Politicians seemed to be the policy makers for educational change, grounding their judgements on economics alone. Data were becoming the only measuring stick for good teaching practice and indeed for measuring effective schools. The theory of practice of education was being strongly influenced by management practices; the culture of love, based on service, seemed to be dying. This was taking place at a time when welfare issues in schools were growing at an alarming rate.

It was a time that called me to question the foundation that I had built my life's work on. I felt everything I valued as an educationalist - the building of meaningful relationships within a caring school environment, was becoming obsolete in the story of education and I believed that I too was perhaps becoming obsolete in the business of education. I was in the dark soul of night - at the crossroads.

I came to Ferndale believing that the remote, rural community would be somewhat removed from the changed educational agenda and that perhaps I could continue to be the type of educator I believed was needed. How innocent I was! I had no idea that in fact this place would call me to question every aspect of my personal and professional life and change my concept of 'self' and 'teacher' forever. It would take me to what Duignan (1997) calls the 'inner territory' and take me on a journey that would hold me for many years. I needed to travel through the feelings of hopelessness, cynicism, emptiness and



loneliness as I grappled with a community that was giving up the fight, as it tackled change and with a changing educational environment I was losing faith in. It is within this context that I place this chapter.

### **Revolutionary change**

It is vital to state upfront that change was an incredible, ever-present, ever-impacting, turbulent, chaotic, real force in my life in the time I was in Ferndale. The story of leadership itself is one of profound change and paradox as shown below:

<b><u>CHANGE</u></b>	<b><u>PARADOX</u></b>
Multicultural places	- within an environment that can reflect intolerance and prejudice
High-tech environments	- where students are struggling to be skilled in the technologies
Places where the political agenda of reaching targets and standards are becoming a measuring stick of individual performance and of teacher performance	- while there is a move to develop authentic assessments that explore deep learning
Places where social problems are impacting on and demanding a rapid response	- from an educational community that seems ill-equipped and resourced to meet the challenge.
Places that embrace multiple intelligences and varied learning styles	- while there is a great agitation from the political agenda, from parent expectations and the systems control to want greater standardization to equal 'quality' education



Although there are many authors who study change as a theoretical exercise, this was never part of my life while in Ferndale. Change felt so close it could almost be touched. Mal Lee (1997) writes of change as a revolution - something that is “not part of a pattern” (p. 4). The word revolution comes closest to describing life at that time when I first arrived in Ferndale. When thinking of change from this perspective, my thoughts immediately go to the change in my own personal life during my time in Ferndale.

At 2.24am on a cold, winter’s morning in May, 1998, my Dad breathed his last breath as I held him in my arms. Dad’s death gave me my greatest insight and understanding into what Mal Lee calls ‘revolutionary change.’ His death caused, and is still causing, changes that mean things can never be the same for me again. I cannot reconfigure my world to the way it used to be. My world has changed forever. My Dad’s death remains with me as an inexplicable, life-changing, all-encompassing event. It is not comfortable, easily attended to, where things eventually get back to where they started. It is not about a “dent made to the structure that will be invariably rectified after the change makers depart the scene” (Lee, 1997, p. 4). The juxtaposition of my Dad’s death with the significant changes that were happening within the Ferndale community at the same time, had the sense of being revolutionary. Life was being turned around, heightening my understanding that things would never be the same again for the Ferndale community, as they would not be for me. My own Dad’s death, helped me to understand, empathise with, and support the community as it tried to respond to an environment that was changing rapidly.

### **Factory model of schooling**

In looking at the future of schooling in Ferndale, I was called to question every part of the education system and the structures that I worked with in my school. Lee (1997) challenged me to consider that maybe in my past, I had been only “tinkering at the edges while the underlying factory model [of schooling] remains untouched” (p. 5). The focus of schools was on “ incremental change and on refining the current organisational model of education provision” (Lee, 1997, p.



5). The students of Ferndale, like students all over the globe, were being educated for life in a knowledge based world that no longer existed. Students began school in age-based classes, and moved through the grades for the next thirteen years as if they were part of an assembly line. As they moved along the line, they were tested and measured within the boundaries of the KLA (Key Learning Areas.) These were used “to sift out the management material and identify the workers. Schools today still work upon structures devised to meet the needs of the nineteenth century” (Lee, 1997, p. 5). The Industrial Age factory model had remained untouched in Ferndale, similar to most other Australian schools. The reality for the lives of the children meant that I could no longer allow this model to continue. It was with this mindset and the reality of the rural school that I faced change.

As a leader within the school, I was confronted with many expectations, challenges and dilemmas that came from within and beyond the school, as well as the most pressing urgent ones that came from within myself. The ever-present movement of schools was being paralleled to companies, where performances had defined measures and expectations, created confusion, frustration and inner turmoil. I valued ethical relationships and the building of a culture of support and dynamic learning for children. This seemed to be undermined by corporate management standards and values that were creeping into the planning and definition of classroom practice. Often ‘the feeling in the gut’ was one of knowing that the human person, the one with the creative zeal for learning, thinking and acting, was not valued. These dilemmas impacted closely on the children within the classrooms of Ferndale.

### **Building and sustaining relationships**

As already mentioned, Ferndale, like many other rural communities, had been dealing with a multitude of complex, socio-economic problems. Despite these challenges, rural Australia and in this case, the rural Ferndale community remain a vital national asset. In order to survive this rapid rate of change and to ensure community sustainability, it has been suggested that rural communities



need to focus on long-term rather than short-term, and internal rather than external 'solutions', based on strengthening linkages within their communities. My time in Ferndale certainly realised that short term, external solutions were ineffective in bringing about any sustainable change and that external solutions always failed to understand the magnitude and the reality of the problems within the community. Rural schools are one of the major organisational/government services remaining in rural areas to help build and sustain strong school-community partnerships. In this time of turbulence, the challenge facing the school, rested in its capacity to hold onto what were the core beliefs and understandings it held, and to be creative in its response to the complex, demanding changes that were happening every day. Nothing was certain any longer.

Today there is a vast array of texts concerned with the subject of change and the necessary skills needed to manoeuvre change, as the world faces challenges and possibilities arising from such movements as globalisation, knowledge explosion, information technology, the widening gap between rich and poor, environmental concerns and spiritual quests. Schools are microcosms of society, and, as such, their cultural character is shaped by their cultural environment.

When I became Principal in Ferndale in 1995, I quickly learnt the meaning of a cultural environment that had been torn and broken by the elements of change. I searched out how the world of Ferndale had been. I needed this information to make sense of the reality for the community. I asked many questions of the 'oldies' as they carried stories of the past and in many cases, the gloomy heaviness that they felt for the future of Ferndale's children. Many of them freely opened up to tell me of their proud past. They allowed me to jot down these conversations so that I had a record of their thoughts:



*It's all gone now...the banks, the factory, the butchers, the bakers. I'd go down the street once a week with my trolley and be right for the week. There's nothing left now. I can't drive, so I wait for the bus, go into town, wait all day and come home late. It takes a lot out of me.*

*I knew what money I had. I'd go to the bank and get it out or put it in. Now I can't do that. I don't know computers. They're the only answer you get from the bank.*

*Everyone had work. There was a real business around the place everyday and a real sense of belonging. Now there's no one around – the place is dead all the time. Everything's closed. I've never been depressed but I think you could say our world in Ferndale is very depressing. There's nothing to stay for. Me, I'm not going anywhere. Me kids have all gone and when they come home, there's nothing for them to do or see.*

*When I half shut my eyes I can see the past. It's busy, happy and full of fun. Now there's nothing here. Even at the war service last November, there were me two mates and the kids and me dog. Made me think about what's life all about. Next year...I dunno.*

*There's some new folk in the town. They bring heaps of problems with them. They come for the cheap housing and they don't know how to live in the country. They're not fitting in.*

*Thoughts from 'oldies' about their past and the impact of change, 1997.*

The 'oldies' tell the story of the impact of change on the community. The socio-economic context that brought poor people into the community, who had little or





no connection with, or understanding of, rural life of Ferndale, created problems that the community was ill-equipped to deal with. These words express the old locals' sense of isolation from what was a familiar Ferndale world - a sense of not belonging anymore. A sense of acceptance for the way things are is held within the words 'I'm not going anywhere' even though life had become hard. The reference to Remembrance Day (November 11 – signing of the Armistice), being a forgotten tradition in the town, symbolises the senior citizens' past being removed, forgotten, not valued, except for "two mates, the kids and me dog." It again indicates the connection with the two generations, the old people and the children of the school.

My search was supported by a 1998 study into the impact of rural decline on families and communities (Deakin University, 1998, p. 6). Ferndale was part of the research. A brief summary of the findings were:

- people with vision and sense of hope for the future were in the minority;
- most people were pessimistic and believed nothing could be done-that the town was doomed to become a ghost town;
- most people were apathetic; and
- many people felt disenfranchised and felt they did not have a place of influence in the decisions made about Ferndale's future.

The study concluded that:

It is now firmly established that rural people are generally disadvantaged relative to urban Australians with respect to life changes, material and social deprivation, poverty, income levels, prices...unemployment, housing quality, education, expectations and attainment and occupation opportunities and achievement. Their total well-being...has recently taken a severe battering. (Cheers,1998, p. 3)

'A severe battering' meant that life had changed at an alarming rate in the rural community, and there were no structures or resources within the community to



support it to manage change. Nor was there any ownership or understanding of the change. The community members considered that change had been done to them, and they felt disempowered and disenfranchised. Change represented death to what was known and treasured within the community. Change had brought with it social problems that had never been known in the community. For example:

- increasingly diverse population;
- changed views of morality;
- self-destructive behaviour in adolescents;
- violence within the community;
- support for community structures had disappeared;
- technological revolution increasing the gap between haves and have-nots in the community;
- new stresses on families, resulting in the need for emotional and psychological support for children in their formative, critical years; and
- an increase in fractured families, family violence.

### **Shire President's visit**

At the time of the local elections in 1998, the Shire President visited the school to gauge how the school was faring in times of local council economic rationalisation. He was interested in understanding the school's standing in the community as its population growth had doubled. This was not in line with other small schools in his Shire. His view of the community was accurate, but he was condemned by the locals for doing nothing to support a community fighting for its very existence. He did not survive the local elections to serve another term:

*Indicators of dying town syndrome are obvious enough in the form of closed shops and churches, unsaleable houses and a changing, as well as declining population. For a start, young people are hard to spot, most having departed to find employment in larger towns. The remaining residents are becoming older and poorer than many others in Australia. In*



*recent years there has been a new population arriving in Ferndale, they are welfare-dependent families who have moved to access cheap housing. The lack of affordable housing in the regional centres some distance from Ferndale has resulted in problem families moving to Ferndale where we have minimal services and opportunities for regular, paid employment virtually non-existent. Inevitably there have been tensions between the established locals and these new arrivals – the so-called ferals.*

*Oral Comment from Shire President, 1998*

The Shire President commented on the changed socio-economic conditions of Ferndale. He tells a story of a community dying, as the young move away to larger centres and the remaining population grows old. His reference to the 'so-called ferals' refers to the poorer, welfare-dependent people who arrived in Ferndale because of the amount of available, vacant, cheap housing. Ferndale had no support structures for this needy, dependent group of people. Lack of employment and support structures, as well as the disadvantage of isolation, created welfare problems and caused distress to the locals.

### **Embracing technology**

As school leader, I strove to keep the school on an even keel in the midst of change, and worked to ensure that the school kept a true course as it coped with change. Peter Ellyard (1998) suggested that a new world view was needed, one that he called 'planetism', a view that reached beyond self and national interests to a world-wide concern. He held the view that leaders were needed who would embrace this world view and envision a preferred future, create and shape change and assist others to thrive in the postmodernist world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The approach of such leaders would be to create vision driven futures. These leaders would ideally set out to create positivity in looking to the future and not be limited to solving what was wrong with the present. Ellyard (1998) believed that good leaders created hope: hope was used to create inspiration, and inspiration was used to create commitment. Although



my experience in Ferndale felt removed from a consideration of a global, world-wide perspective, I was drawn to Ellyard's belief in the creation of hope.

My experience proved to me that once there was hope, all other obstacles were removed. One such experience of this hope connected strongly to Ellyard's view of creating and shaping change to assist others to thrive. It was the way new technologies were embraced by the Ferndale community. I held the fear that the children's increased technology skills would actually cause more division and distance from the wider Ferndale community. Hence, the school strategically positioned its computers within the school where they could be easily accessed by the whole Ferndale community. The children taught their basic skills to the community during school hours and in the evenings. This 'passing on' of information increased the skills of the community as well as strengthening the skills and confidence of the children. Tourists from around the world passed through the town and used the school's computer centre to check emails from home, sharing life experiences with the children and the locals. The centre also published a weekly newspaper for the town, using the facilities of the school and the skills of the children. Technology was embraced, taught, shared and valued, providing community exposure to the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The children brought the drama of their lives to school each day. These dramas formed part of the curriculum, engaging them in problem solving relevant issues in their lives. The students became my mentors; they were the ones I processed my thoughts and concerns with. I had no better problem solvers than the children. I was called back to my most basic instincts about teaching/learning – the building of trust and understanding while creating a teaching environment that was relevant to the children's lives. Stoll and Fink (1996) place great importance on the relationship between the culture of the school and the type of students it produces. It influences students' morale and self-concept and creates "active involvement and responsibility on the part of the students" (p.16).



### **Birth of a new story**

I believed strongly that the quality of the education provided for young people would indeed shape the future and certainly shape their capacity and willingness to live in their futures. And I believed that, as Principal, I was able to profoundly influence how the school community managed its ever-present, constant change. I agree with Fullan (1993) who argues that educational change depends on what teachers do and think. I was confronted with expectations, challenges and dilemmas that came from within and without the school as well as most pressing urgent ones, coming from within myself. Although, at first, I felt very unsure, it became clear that this time was in fact the birthing of a new story in Ferndale - the beginning of a change process that would involve the school and the community in a journey of hope.

Historically, schools reflect and reproduce the society they find themselves within, so the school reflected irrationality, unpredictability, instability and uncertainty. I was determined to ensure that the school as a learning organization would attend to the learning of its students and to the creation of an environment that supported this learning. Before my coming to the school, there had been well-meaning attempts at quick fixes and one-shot interventions to keep pace with change. The key stakeholders, the parents, had not been involved and like other schools, there was a one-size-fits-all mentality which could never be appropriate for Ferndale. The school had employed consultants and advisors to implement new educational initiatives, but with no real lasting effect because they were far removed from the reality impacting on the school. Despite all the changes to do with the organization of schools over the years, Ferndale school had changed little in how it promoted learning. The school had kept taking on new initiatives and programs but never took anything out. So the school's curriculum was disconnected from the reality of the children's lives. The children were disinterested, apathetic, achieved low standards and took no ownership for their learning and showed little or no enthusiasm.



## **Authentic leadership**

I began to develop my 'own map' of leadership in Ferndale. I found myself facing tensions, dilemmas and paradox everyday as I tried to navigate the constant change. Handy (1994) advocates that we

...learn to frame the confusion and find pathways through the paradoxes by understanding what is happening and by learning to be different. We need to learn to dance with turbulent and confusing situations that frequently seem to present themselves as seeming contradictions and dilemmas. We must break the bonds imposed on us by the either/or mindset. (p. 3)

I determined to rekindle a culture of faith for and within the community. I recognized that what was needed was an unswerving commitment from me if this was to happen.

Change was happening every day in Ferndale, and so was my understanding of leadership. The changes that were taking place economically, socially and in my own life, inevitably had me questioning and searching. At this point, I turned to the literature on change. I was empowered by what I read. The writings of Stoll & Fink (1996), Fullan (1993), Beare (1993), Handy (1994) and Druker (1999) all provided me with powerful research and practical experience to engage in, as I set about thinking about change and moving to try and get a grasp on the changes taking place, rather than always being in a state of reacting after the event. I became a passionate student of change. Change seemed to be the only constant in my work in Ferndale. As I read the writings of many of these change writers, I contextualized their writings to my reality, analysed, scrutinized, sorted and discarded if needed. This brought a deep understanding to the Ferndale story. This theoretical understanding, using my own context as a backdrop, provided me with a powerful tool in my working and being in Ferndale. It taught me that working with changing the school's culture -



‘the way we do things around here’ was the medium to use to plan change to have a powerful impact on the school, and to finally take it by the neck and work with it.

The Ferndale community had been living within a world of change without ever reading about change theories and their impact. They were indeed living out much of what was written by the change managers in the literature I was exposed to. The community had been caught in constant change from within and without the school for thirty years – scarcely had one set of reforms been formulated, let alone properly implemented and another was in genesis.

The Ferndale community had indeed been shaped by change. There was certainty that what lay ahead was uncertain and everything was now tentative. The Ferndale community wanted to survive in uncertain times. The community needed to set itself on a course of being open to all creative possibilities, as “the culture that survives to direct the future of the planet will be one that encourages as much creativity as possible, but also finds ways to choose novelty on the basis of the future well-being of the whole, not just the separate fields” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 325).

Ferndale school community was transformed into a place of

- academic integrity;
- lifelong learning; and
- extraordinary care for its children

where the power of the learning process was recognised as transforming lives in school.



## **Summary**

The notion of change was explored within the context of the rural community of Ferndale and gave explanation to the kind of educational leader that was needed. Change was embraced to support creative management of change and to continue the building of relationships based on co-operation and collegiality.

## **The story continues...**

The following, and final, chapter is a reflection of the aspects of leading explored in the previous chapters - the Principal within, the Principal as teacher and learner, the Principal in community, the Principal within change. It documents my personal insights as I lived my principalship within the Ferndale community. It also suggests recommendations for those wishing to reflect on their own leading within schools.





## CHAPTER 9

### LESSONS LEARNT

&

### WISDOM TO BE SHARED



*When the best leader's work is done,  
The people say,  
"we did it ourselves".  
----- Chinese proverb, 604 B.C.*



Ferndale community is alive and vibrant and aware that its future is ever-changing. It is ready for “an exciting journey into open-ended evolutionary space with no fixed, predetermined destination” and the community accepts its “inability to know the final destination or to be in control of the journey” (Stacey, 1998, p.13).

## **Introduction**

This final chapter brings this moment in time in a rural community to a close. The research in this document began with no intent of being documented. The documentation came out of an inner need to write thoughts and stories to help myself in the process of discovery of what Principal/Leadership was about. The writing came out of the realization that the people of Ferndale’s story needed to be written as it tells a story far beyond that of the experience lived. It tells the story of principalship, of leadership and of a deep dark journey within.

I used my writing, time and time again, as a place to go and reflect, to withdraw to my innermost thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams and despair as I reflected on who I was, why I was doing what I was doing and what was the purpose of it all. The story gives meaning to a despairing community through the wonder and positivity of a group of children, born into a time in history in their community where there was fading hope, little or no incentive for change and a helplessness in the psyche of the people, particularly the aged community. The writing has given me the moments needed to reflect on the life lived, the people who made up the story and to depth the story in a broader educational context. In my writing I have focused on preserving the integrity of the hearts and minds and spirits of the people whose lives are within the pages of this manuscript.

I have felt like a chameleon as I have been writing, not sure what colour I would be taking on next, not sure what the next page would read like, unsure if the pages I would be writing would reflect the true purpose and journey I was on. Like the chameleon which tries to blend in with its environment, I have not



wanted to be noticed in the pages of my script. I have not wanted to be a leading character in the story, not wanted to stand out or be seen as different. I have wanted to remain camouflaged. This camouflage is important to me as I worked to be one with the community – not always up front or taking the lead.

I was unfolding as a Principal over the ten year period and in some way, ignorant of the change process I myself was in. This evolution, this inner reflection of my own life, tells the story of a Principal growing into Principalship. It tells a story of the struggle that is leadership: the coming to know oneself in the role and the being called to grow, change and adapt, accepting that the journey is a continuous movement towards awareness.

The story has been worth writing because it holds many comparisons and learnings for others on similar journeys. Choosing chapters has caused much frustration and anguish, as I have struggled to dis-integrate a lived experience and compartmentalize it into a chapter or a theme. The compartmentalising only serves for the purpose of the study. But lived experience of leading, teaching, changing, growing into community was integrated as I opened up to myself and my own understanding of the path of leadership.

The journey of the chameleon Principal has brought me to the place where I am now: a place where I am comfortable in my own skin, as I allow it to constantly change in colour. It has brought me to the kind of leader I am now, changing colour wherever I go. It has moulded and shaped who it is that does the leading now. The chameleon in me knows I will continue to change and evolve as that is the nature and character of the chameleon and the leader. The journey has brought me to a place of looking differently at educational leadership. In this world that Fullan (2007) believes is filled with “intense individualism,” where people are constantly disengaging from community, leading a primary school community, where one is honoured with the care and education of young lives, relationships must be at the forefront of all endeavours.



Dealing with young lives and the lives of their families, the Principal must be ethical in the way life is lived and have a true sense of moral purpose in going about the work. Although this autoethnography is steeped in the setting and geography of a small rural community, the story can be aligned to any setting, as I know the forming of authentic meaningful relationships is the foundation stone from which true educational leadership comes. I believe the lessons learned can be applied to other leadership settings. It has provided many challenges to me in thinking about the way I go about my leading and I pose these challenges to any leader in the work of leading.

Leadership is a challenging issue for schools and for leaders themselves. This autoethnography has tried to analyse issues as they arose in the day to day life of the school in the Ferndale setting and provided much of the analytical text within it. Over the years, I learnt to self-critique everything in the work I did and I believe this is a vital part of leadership if it is to be real. Grounded and deepened in the story and lives of those being lived, I have explored what I consider the really challenging issues of leadership today:

- Leading from within;
- Leading by knowing education;
- Leading within community; and
- Leading within an environment of change.

### **Leading from within**

My lived experience has led me to a place where I have had to know more deeply who I am. This search has been filled with fear and trepidation as I explored deep within myself. Out of the journey within, I was able to grow in confidence of who I was, who was leading, and I grew in the courage and conviction of my beliefs. I am now clear in understanding that I dealt with many challenges from an honest, ethical stance because of my own journey within. Authors of leadership today, like Fullan (2003), call this struggle “moral purpose” but for me it has been the deep knowing who I am and the courage to act with integrity and compassion with this knowing. It’s as simple and as



difficult as that. This is the call to leaders having the challenging role of leadership.

In leading my community, it was not unusual for me to leave my family in the early morning and not return until late into the evening. This was all done with the earnest of intent but I believe now, with a lack of balance - a lack of wholeness and healthiness. I was immersed in the teaching, the leading, the problems of the students, the community, the staff, and the school system. I did not understand, in those early days, that to be true to myself, to my loved ones and to my community, I needed to gain perspective and balance in my own personal and professional life. I was working very long hours, responding to every request asked of me and could justify it all because there were not many others around to do the task. Without understanding, perhaps I was trying to prove to myself and to my community my worth, somewhat like the story of an Indian chief in Loader's (1999) *The Inner Principal*:

A chief wants to prove that he has more riches than anyone else, so he invites all his rivals to a potlatch, a giant bonfire. They all settle around the fire and the chief says, 'the fire needs more fuel' and throws on one of his most valued possessions, a canoe. The fire flares up and the heat gets intense but the chief is not satisfied. 'It is still too chilly,' so he tosses on a couple more canoes and a few buffalo robes. His rivals are pretty uncomfortable with the heat but they have to continue to sit close to the fire, to show that it is not much of a blaze. And so it goes, until, over the hours, he consumes everything of value that he owns, knowing that the size of the fire, the heat, the discomfort of his rivals will be remembered as the measure of his wealth and greatness. (p. 60)

I, like Loader, found the metaphor of the story hard to deal with, as it was telling me of my own foolishness in my life and work in the Principal role. It was the story of my own dying to self as I worked hard and long for the community of



Ferndale, the term referred to by Fullan (as cited in Brown & Moffett, 1999, p.90) as the “moral martyrs” in referring to isolated leaders working alone to support the learning community.

Part of my inner journey was to address this imbalance and to find a place for self in it all. This journey is a challenge to me and I believe challenges all leaders in their roles. It is a journey I will always struggle with, in balancing personal transformation and educational reform. During times of unprecedented complexity, change and confusion, bringing order, meaning and purpose to self and community is indeed what is important. This time in history calls for school leaders to

...become more self-aware and efficacious as individuals at the interpersonal, organisational and systemic levels. And each time we hear the call and begin the journey again, we will be doing so with a higher level of self-knowledge and a deeper and more reverent understanding of the individuals, community and world around us. (Brown & Moffett, 1999, p.147)

I began an exploration of what an educational leader was. The more I studied the literature of leadership, the more I was taken on a deep journey within myself in a search for:

- Who was I as educational leader within myself?
- Who was I as educational leader within the school?
- Who was I as educational leader within the community?

This took me back to my earliest beginnings, back to my family roots to bring context to who was I who was leading a school. My identity – the core of me, my being, was found within my past, formed in my past and grounded, shaped, moulded and nurtured in my present. This journey within had to be taken, had to be ‘exposed’, recognised and documented before I could genuinely look to exploring the question of who I was as leader. It was from my past heritage that I had come to be, and it was this ‘coming to be’ that arrived in Ferndale. I



arrived with my past, my learnings and in my present. The influences of my own education had also influenced my way of viewing education. My early experiences of a punitive, harsh education system defined my own search to be a teacher, very different from my past experiences of teacher. I learnt that the quality of a relationship formed was an accurate measure of the learning taking place. This deep 'knowing' about teaching created my focus on the heart of teaching. It concerned me with the forming of meaningful relationships before curriculum or teaching or practice was to be considered. This challenged me to know myself, the person who was doing the teaching, the leading, the relating. It is this fundamental question about the self that caught me and held me to it, until I was able to articulate clearly, genuinely and sincerely who I was. My study challenges leaders to travel the road of 'finding the self,' knowing that this is foundational for who is doing the leading.

The journey within and without is what has given me the confidence, the belief and the knowing that I am being authentic to who I am and to what I believe in. It has been from the journey within that I have questioned every aspect of my life – personal and professional. This journey was one of seeking, searching myself for answers to:

- What it is that my voice is saying?
- What are my ears hearing?
- What are my eyes seeing?
- What is my heart feeling?
- What is of value to me and why?
- How do I understand and configure my world?
- Why do I treasure the ordinary in my life?

This journey gripped me, yet gave me life and vigour. This time marked my own coming to recognise and listen to my inner knowing, my inner beliefs. This was, and still is, the time that I have marked as my becoming authentic to who I was/am. I recognise that there will be many more times of questioning to be



faced – the knowing is the journey to be travelled before other issues of life and work can be explored.

I believe the Principal/teacher/leader must first take the journey within to make sense of every aspect of educational life. Leaders are bombarded with the issues of time management, conflict resolution, administrative issues and very easily can forget the self. The Principal can become disassociated from the self, from the core that one is. This disassociation can be the cause of much distress, disconnection, apathy, cynicism, misalignment from one's beliefs and dreams, and from the true purpose of what leading a school community really means. My learning has been steeped in knowing that what I do in my school, the way I do what I do, the decisions I make about what is important to me, the relationships formed, the teaching and learning are all completely connected to and steeped within an understanding of who I am.

I hold the belief that if education is to be meaningful and relevant and authentic, educational leaders need to spend time in reflection, in looking within for meaning and to give meaning to the work of the Principal. The Principal must walk the talk, but the talk must come from a voice that is clear, does know itself, and is able to speak for others, to others, with others, so that indeed the voice does make a difference for the school community, for the educational world, and for the self.

### **Leading as teacher**

Looking within called to question my understanding of education - what is learning? What is school? Why is education vital to me? Why am I an educator? Why does education hold my passion? Again these questions called me to ask who I was as an educator, and why. As leadership in the form of principalship was new for me in the beginning of this research, I needed to deepen my understanding of myself as a leader. This broadened my concept of the leader from the person in charge, the one responsible for everything at the end of the day to a person of integrity, of credibility, of personal presence and awareness





who is able to work with a school community, connect each member and support them to become part of a learning organization, as Senge (1997) would have it.

Being exposed to a multitude of leadership concepts, and reflecting on their relevance, or lack of, in the Ferndale context, has taught me that the Principal must find one's own way if understanding is to eventually come, and if one's leadership is to be real and lived and recognised as worth following. I believe Principals must travel their own journey of learning about who they are as educational leaders – a journey that can only be travelled and understood within the context of the school community that one is Principal of. I learnt that I could not take on a textbook concept of leadership to fit me, and I learnt that being a conglomerate of different concepts seemed to fit me best, a conglomerate of colours and environments. This 'fitting' only lasted for a time before it needed to be reconceptualized, as context and environment and my own perception and understanding changed.

The ever-changing world of education requires leaders who are passionate about searching, but requires leaders to recognise that the search is the vehicle to continually be open to ever-changing challenges of people, their lives and their educational endeavours. So the question of who was I, has been recognised as one that is problematic by nature and one that cannot be given a finite answer. The journey challenges Principals and aspiring Principals to look deep within who they are, to their own relationship with the self, before entering the sacred territory of another. When there is openness to an explanation of the self, there is also an openness to the 'other', to the surprise of another person and to being there for the 'other'. The 'other' leads to the journey of educational leadership.

My lived experience taught me about the power of influence. I believe I have had influence on the children of Ferndale, and I was influenced by the children in a myriad of ways that were unperceived at the time. I was affected by my



students, and affected my students and the lives of people with whom they interacted. This influence grew out of open-ended relationships, that over time helped the children and me construct and experience meaning out of life. As educator of the children, I realized I had to commit to them, their families and their community in order to make the boundaries between school life and their life fluid, permeable and relevant. This community required me to deeply understand and learn that the quality of the relationships formed had an incredible influence on the learning done. Over time, the children of Ferndale responded to high expectations and immense change in their learning modes. They were within an environment free from failure or emotional threat to themselves. Their emotional and social needs were attended to in classrooms that worked to create environments where trust, acceptance, respect and care were norms. Through relevant curriculum and quality teaching and assessment of the daily life of the school, the children became responsible for their own learning. They, without knowing it, were aspiring to excellence as they aligned their heads and hearts in their educational journeys.

The Ferndale children opened me to a new mindset, a new view of my image of the self, the teacher, the Principal. I learnt to be pliable, a work in motion, never reaching completion, and I learnt to keep searching for solutions to problems. The children showed me what hope for the future looked like, as their relentless search for meaning from the past made sense of their presence and gave them a hope for a future. They were my teachers, constantly sharing their lives with me and giving me important messages about:

- What was affecting them?
- What teaching worked?
- What didn't?
- How did they learn best?
- What changes were needed to make things better?

As educational leader, I did much learning about self, about children and about education. The lesson for me, and others prepared to listen, is that educational



leaders must remain open to learning, to sometimes laying fallow, vulnerable, accepting advice while at other times what may be required is a grappling, a searching and grabbing to make sense of advice. The educational leader must be the lead learner, the model to others of a learner.

### **Leading community**

Somewhere in all this is the reality that the challenge for contemporary education is to grab onto a sense of shared purpose and to know that lives are transformed in the learning process if it is done with heart and mind together. Leaders must first know who it is they are to lead. To do this, they need to know the community of people they are working for and with. This knowing the community is not unlike the knowing of the self. There must be a time of watching, listening, waiting and a time without judgement where one is immersed in the culture of the community. This immersion is crucial before a leader can lead. The leader needs to know who is being led, what are the hopes and aspirations of those led, where they want to be led, where they have already been, the joys and pain of the journey already done and why they want to go where they are going. Sometimes leaders go to a community with their own agendas to do the leading. They know where they want to go, but it is neither their right nor their privilege to have this mindset. At this time, the leader must be the follower, so that when it is time to take the lead, others will follow.

My task became clear shortly after arriving in Ferndale. It was a disjointed, inequitable group of people who seemed to work against each other rather than for each other. On one level, there was dysfunction, fragmentation, discord and conflicting ideas about a vision and purpose for the school. The school entered a period of struggle and testing as community members looked for linear solutions to school and community life. A very important learning for me at that time was to listen and to share conversations rather than to seek solutions to the increasing issues and demands. These shared conversations opened the community to complexity, to chaos, and to an understanding that there was no one right answer or solution. These conversations were in fact the beginning of



a collective search for a way of making the school capable of addressing the needs of the students and their diverse stories. The community's engagement in the life of the school meant that it was opened up to the complexities associated with the social, economic and moral demands of the school. This opening up meant that a vision was created. Through a shared mission, the school community was able to find its collective wisdom and find answers to chaos and the troubling complexities that seemed to present themselves constantly. As a group of individuals, we were able to work together to transform the school into an authentic learning organization. Together the community came to recognize the position of influence that was had by all, as leaders in the lives and experiences of the children. I believe the power of collaboration within leadership is a core requisite of leadership if our schools and leaders are being prepared for a post-modern society.

As school doors were opened up to parents, community doors were opened to the school. The school community came to understand that connection with the wider community was critical if there were to be a working together to transform the school into an authentic learning organization, within an authentic community.

### **Leading change**

As I came to deciding on chapter titles, I knew that one chapter was non-negotiable, a chapter on change. I had lived in a world of constant change, living life in a place of tension, paradox and apprehension. I believe that no story of leadership can be void of this aspect of leading.

As leader I was immersed in supporting the community to respond to the increasingly complex demands of the world of the Information Age. The old answers that had served the Ferndale community well for many generations were no longer viable for the questions that the children were asking, or for the questions that the world was asking of their generation.



I was searching for answers as I was intent on ensuring that the Ferndale children were prepared for the world they would venture forth into. I dreamed a school of academic integrity, lifelong learning, and extraordinary care for its children. My dream was within an environment of unprecedented complexity, confusion and change within the small rural community. In the ten years of being in Ferndale, the world of education itself faced incredibly difficult, demanding times. The forces of change and complexity pervaded every part of Ferndale life. People experienced complacency, chaos, complexity and unpredictability, all at the same time. As leader, I believed my role was to build bridges, and create links to people, with people. Within this disorder, interconnections were made. Relationships between the children and the 'oldies', and the 'oldies' and the children's parents seemed to transcend the confusion that was all about. The community seemed to find its own way through the change story. At some time in the Ferndale story, there came an unconscious acceptance by most of the community that life was, and would continue to be, filled with chaos, discord and disequilibrium. My role was to make this unconscious acceptance a conscious one, so that the community members were able to own the reality that they had overcome despair and that they were open to possibilities and hopefulness.

The Ferndale story as told has passed. Many of the characters have died, some families have moved on and children are growing up. But the insights gained along the way are still valid and relevant to any community, to any setting or time. The search for authenticity, to become fearlessly open about one's values and beliefs, and to have the courage to take unprecedented action on behalf of children is indeed the calling for all Principals, all leaders, all teachers, all parents in education. No longer can there be complacency about education and how schools exist. Leaders must be authentic, forward-looking people. They must be leaders for tomorrow, recognizing the power of schools in transforming lives, through children coming to know themselves, know others and the world in which they live.



The Ferndale community members rejoined the splintered parts of themselves as they reached a place of clarity; a clarity about priorities and a vision for the future. Ferndale school had been an obsolete model of education within a community that was breaking down and going out of business. The task was to transform the school into a vibrant, caring, non-factory like place of lifelong learning, through courage and commitment to the children. As leader, I was called to reflect on what was important to the children, their families, their community and their school. Once I was clear about what was important, my role was to be unwavering in translating a vision into action with and for the community. In doing so, as leader, I was taking a stand for the children's future. This meant that I had to act with extraordinary care and integrity, as I needed the courage and the emotional strength in searching for a deeper level of self-knowledge, a higher degree of personal mastery and a new level of consciousness. As time went on, my life felt more authentic to myself and to my community. I was able to draw the community to myself and they became companions on the journey.

But the real leadership story for me was, and still is, the children. The children entrusted to the care of the school leader are the reason to be. Their spirits, their lives, are the reason to be – they awaken the passion within and raise us to be better, be more wise, more real, and more true than we otherwise could ever be. Educational leadership is about children. As the work becomes more demanding:

- issues become more diverse and difficult;
- political agendas have more impact on school life;
- an alarming number of children enter schools who are unprepared cognitively and emotionally to learn;
- social problems are becoming the heart of the school; and
- data based assessment is becoming the measure for a school,

educational leadership becomes more firmly placed in children, their needs, their lives.



## **Wisdom to be Shared**

I did not want to separate the insights and learnings gained from the research story. However, it has become clear to me that there have been powerful, guiding forces along my Principal journey, that could speak to others who obviously will adapt, modify, reflect on, and blend in with their own, unique context where the leading is being done. I have used the questions that have kept me focused and concentrated throughout the pages of the research to give definition to the recommendations from my life lived.

### *Who is the educational leader within the self?*

I recommend that the educational leader within the self needs to:

- know who is doing the leading and have the courage to act with integrity and compassion with this knowing;
- find the courage and the emotional strength in searching for a deeper self-knowledge and personal mastery;
- gain perspective and balance in one's personal and professional life, in order to be true to self, loved ones and the community;
- search for authenticity and become fearlessly open about one's values and beliefs;
- address any imbalance found and find a place for the self;
- bring order, purpose and meaning to self before dealing with complexity, change and confusion within the workplace;
- question every aspect of the personal and professional life; and
- recognize and listen to one's own inner knowing, one's own inner beliefs

### *Who is the educational leader within the school?*

I recommend that the educational leader within the school needs to:

- know oneself as the teacher-educator;
- be passionate about searching for ever-changing challenges;
- be open to the 'other';



- have the courage to take unprecedented action on behalf of the children;
- recognize the power of schools in transforming lives;
- act with extraordinary care and integrity for students and their families;
- form open-ended relationships of commitment to students, their families and their community so that boundaries become fluid, permeable;
- be comfortable with being a 'work in motion', never reaching completion;
- learn from the students;
- remain open to learning; and
- be vulnerable

*Who is the educational leader within the community?*

I recommend that the educational leader within the community needs to:

- find out what is important in the lives of the children, their families and their community;
- create a sense of shared purpose within the learning community - sharing heart and mind;
- first know who it is you are leading - watch, listen, wait. This requires an immersion in the community;
- be a follower of the community;
- build bridges and create links for the community; and
- be unwavering in committing to translating a vision into action with and for the community

**Postscript**

Educational leaders must never lose sight of why they do what they do. They must never forget that their leadership is to ensure that the present and future of the children are made meaningful and significant because of their leadership.





Leadership is not about the leader, it is about those being led and the enabling relationship between leader and led.

The Ferndale story will remain within my being forever. It has formed me, shaped me, wounded me and healed me. It has challenged me, given me great grief and opened me up to incredible possibilities. Another story that was part of my knowing before coming to Ferndale and that stayed with me every step of the way enables me to bring closure to the Ferndale story. This story has been referred to in Chapter 5 and can be found in Appendix C: The Eagle Story.

In reading the story of the eagle, I suggest that the eagle can represent the Principal, the child, the parent, the teacher, the whole community. All can replace the word 'eagle' and the message remains the same: relationships formed must be authentic, steeped in a passion for truth and a search for right meaning. There will always be obstacles, whether they be systemic, change orientated or people oriented. One must listen to the innate wisdom – the inner knowing so that there can be purpose and a knowing about the privilege of living life for and with others. Through deep meaningful relationships formed from a sincere respect and care for the dignity of others (love), there can be a flying – a being what we are meant to become – and once one can fly, one understands what one is meant to become.

The Ferndale story is first and foremost concerned with children. It seems fitting to end with some words taken from Lionni's (1975) children's picture book, *A Colour of His Own*. It speaks to children of the story of the chameleon, a story of constant change, adaptation and reflection:

Parrots are green, goldfish are red, elephants are grey, pigs are pink. All animals have a colour of their own - except for chameleons. They change colour wherever they go. On lemons they are yellow. In the heather they are purple. And on the tiger they are striped like tigers. One day a chameleon who was sitting on a tiger's tail said to himself, "If I remain on



a leaf, I shall be green forever. And so I too will have a colour of my own.” With this thought he cheerfully climbed onto the greenest leaf. But in autumn the leaf turned yellow - and so did the chameleon. Later the leaf turned red, and the chameleon too turned red. And then the winter winds blew the leaf from the branch and with it the chameleon.

The chameleon in the story reflects my own ten year journey in Ferndale and another three years of reflecting upon and recording the journey. The chameleon is me who was complacent and content when things remained the same like elephants being grey and pigs being pink. Eventually in the 1990s, things changed dramatically for me as I began life in Ferndale...the winter winds blew. I became green, yellow, red, black - whatever was needed. I learnt about myself, the world of education and the world of leading. I came to recognize and understand that all the modern day educational theory and leadership perspectives do not burn a candle to the relationship formed between the leader and the led, and that the most important part of the chameleon journey, the journey of Principal, is the colour and the fabric of the relationships along the way.



## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Definition
<b>ARMS meetings</b>	Annual Review meetings of teachers with Principal where there is a reflection of the past year and the creation of goals for the next 12 months
<b>Community</b>	Embraces the rural school community which includes the students, parents, teachers and the township community in which the school exists. The term is used in this study as a reference to the collectivity of the people living within the particular locality of Ferndale who share to varying degrees, common interests and identification with the locality and its inhabitants.
<b>CRLRA</b>	Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia
<b>CSF</b>	The Curriculum and Standards Framework, published in February 2000. It provides sufficient detail for schools and the community to be clear about the major elements of the curriculum and the standards expected of successful learners.
<b>EMA</b>	Educational Maintenance Allowance: a government subsidy given to lower socio-economic families
<b>Ferndale</b>	A small country town, with a population of 503 people, located approximately three hundred kilometres from its capital city and thirty kilometres from its nearest regional city
<b>KLA</b>	Key Learning Area: the term used to describe the subject area in the curriculum
<b>MCEETYA</b>	The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. It reports through the annual National Report on Schooling in Australia on their strategies and initiatives to provide safe, supportive learning environments.
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>Preparatory Grade</b>	This is the first, or elementary year of a child's Primary Schooling
<b>Rubbish Free School</b>	A term used to refer to a school that recycles its own rubbish, thereby earning it the term of Rubbish Free
<b>School Board</b>	The management arm of the school that advisers the Principal in matters of school policy and maintenance



## APPENDICES

- Appendix A Principal role statement
- Appendix B Children's self-discipline and responsibility document
- Appendix C The eagle story
- Appendix D Esther's email 1
- Appendix E Esther's email 2
- Appendix F Story of Arthur
- Appendix G 'Keepers of the Story' project



## Appendix A

### Principal role statement

'I believe the challenge for me as Principal of Ferndale is to help build a creative and adaptive school that is clearly recognised by its community as a dynamic, passionate place of learning where young people are treated with respect and dignity.'

#### Images of the Principal of Ferndale are:

- Companion in Faith:** Ensuring the promotion of education in Faith within the school.
- Staff Leader:** Facilitating a positive climate amongst staff that promotes effective learning and teaching practices and.
- Educational Leader:** Providing effective educational leadership within the school community.
- Teacher:** Facilitating a positive climate amongst the students a clear sense of purpose and school goals.
- Keeper of the Dreams:** Ensuring an effective partnership of authenticity and worth with parents.
- Community Member:** Ensuring that Ferndale operates as part of the community of schools and as a vital part of the Ferndale Community.
- Administrator:** Implementing effective and efficient administration practices and ensure an optimum physical learning environment.
- Pastoral Leader:** Striving to be a pastoral, caring leader.



## **Specific Responsibilities**

### **1.0 Companion in Faith**

- 1.1 To promote and live the school's vision and mission statements.
- 1.2 To walk beside staff, students, parents and community to develop their relationships
- 1.3 To provide opportunities for prayer, liturgical celebrations and reflective moments for all school community members.
- 1.4 To celebrate the presence of God within the community of Ferndale
- 1.5 To work in partnership and to provide leadership to the school community

### **2.0 Staff Leader**

- 2.1 To provide clearly defined communication strategies to staff
- 2.2 To ensure effective teaching practices within the school
- 2.3 To nurture each individual staff member and recognise and affirm the wealth of gifts within the group
- 2.4 To promote a strong effective staff team
- 2.5 To implement regular performance review of staff with constructive feedback.
- 2.6 To affirm accomplishments and effective practices and challenge when necessary.
- 2.7 To build up an effective team by providing opportunities for social and professional development and staff interaction
- 2.8 To be committed to the spiritual and personal development of staff and self

### **3.0 Educational Leader**

- 3.1 to ensure that students are engaged in learning activities that enable them to develop a life-long interest and love of learning as well as an acquisition of skills, knowledge and values
- 3.2 to generate an enthusiasm for learning within the whole community
- 3.3 to ensure that the needs of students are met through appropriate resources and teaching programs



- 3.4 to ensure that students acquire skills necessary to access and process information
- 3.5 to ensure that the 'whole' child is valued in the learning process
- 3.6 to promote high quality work from students
- 3.7 to ensure that effective reporting and assessment processes are in place
- 3.8 to ensure that the children have learning experiences outside the classroom and school environment
- 3.9 to provide the community with a working model of effective learning
- 3.10 to establish an appropriate and well researched professional development program for all staff.

#### **4.0 Teacher**

- 4.1 To establish and implement a Pastoral Care Policy where students are nurtured and well-cared for
- 4.2 To ensure that the learning process is exciting, relevant and fun
- 4.3 To ensure that the children become astute, articulate, sensitive individuals who are responsible to themselves and others
- 4.4 To ensure children are models of strong citizenship
- 4.5 To ensure children can resolve conflicts and live harmoniously despite diversity and challenge
- 4.6 To ensure that the spirit of respect and dignity is valued and lived within the school
- 4.7 To support students to recognize diversity and to celebrate this within the community

#### **5.0 Keeper of the Dreams (Partner with parents)**

- 5.1 To provide regular formal communication with parents e.g. school newsletters
- 5.2 To promote and encourage effective parent involvement in the life of the school.
- 5.3 To establish clearly defined communication channels between home and school.
- 5.4 To be Executive Officer of the School Board
- 5.5 To support Parents & Friends initiatives



- 5.6 To develop skills in conflict resolution, counselling, problem-solving.
- 5.7 To ensure that the rights of parents are acknowledged and respected in all areas of school life.

#### 6.0 **Community Member**

- 6.1 To involve the community in the life of the school and to enable children to be actively involved in the life of the whole community of Ferndale
- 6.2 To support all families to value their place in the Ferndale community and to be valuable community members
- 6.3 To support the community to re-imagine their world to one which empowers them to live with dignity
- 6.4 To effectively represent Ferndale School in the wider community.
- 6.5 To implement the policies and directives of the Education Board and the Director of Education.
- 6.6 To educate the Board members with regard to policy and procedures.
- 6.7 To attend and actively participate in Principal Network meetings.
- 6.8 to establish networks of relationships between parents, staff, students and wider community
- 6.9 to facilitate this networking and building of bridges especially where there is social, religious and economic divisions

#### 7.0 **Administrator**

- 7.1 To clearly delegate tasks and support administrative staff to ensure accountability requirements are met.
- 7.2 Work with the School Board and the Maintenance Committee to clearly identify future demands and the resources required to meet such demands.
- 7.3 To establish supportive record-keeping policies and procedures.
- 7.4 To plan and monitor the school budget in consultation with the school officer
- 7.5 To ensure optimum physical learning environment by utilising available resources to maintain and develop school premises.





**8.0 PASTORAL LEADER**

- 8.1 To work collaboratively with School Board, staff, parents and students on relevant issues pertaining to school life.
- 8.2 To be decisive and consistent in decision making.
- 8.3 To be approachable on relevant matters for all members of the school community.
- 8.4 To be a listening, empathetic leader for members of the school community.
- 8.5 To be a caring leader for students, parents and staff.



## **Appendix B**

### **Children's self-discipline and responsibility document**

This document became part of the school's Pastoral Care document.

*The following is an expression by the children of Ferndale of how Pastoral Care is lived in the everyday reality of their school:*

#### ***How we keep safe in our school***

*We need to:*

- *stay within the school boundaries*
- *nominate an umpire for competitive games*
- *tackle bodies fairly*
- *modify the rules of games to suit all children*
- *play in designated areas*
- *play without using violence eg., punching striking*
- *lookout for children who are hurting*
- *remember to create a safe environment by not throwing missiles*
- *use all equipment with safety in mind*
- *look out for others*
- *walk instead of running when we are inside, so that no one gets hurt.*

#### ***How we speak to each other in our school***

*We need to:*

- *listen to the person who is speaking to us*
- *speak so that we can be heard*
- *respect all persons in the school, shown by the way we treat them*
- *speak to each other without put downs*
- *put our hands up when we need to speak in a big group*
- *look at the person we are in conversation with*
- *understand that verbal abuse is not acceptable under any circumstance at our school*



### ***How we treat each other at school***

We need to:

- *give the little kids a fair go*
- *remember to treat everyone the same*
- *respect everyone*
- *watch out for children who are excluded from games*
- *respect our school buildings and grounds shown by the way we care for them*
- *respect our school environment, shown by the way we care for it.*



## Appendix C

### The eagle story

*The eagle gently coaxed her offspring toward the edge of the nest. Her heart quivered with conflicting emotions as she felt their resistance to her persistent nudging. “Why does the thrill of soaring have to begin with the fear of falling?” she thought. This ageless question was still unanswered by her.*

*As in the tradition of the species, her nest was located high on the shelf of a sheer rock face. Below there was nothing but air to support the wings of each child. “Is it possible that this time it will not work?” She thought. Despite her fears, the eagle knew it was time. Her parental mission was all but complete. There remained one final task – the push.*

*The eagle drew courage from an innate wisdom. Until her children discovered their wings, there was no purpose for their lives. Until they learned how to soar, they would fail to understand the privilege it was to have been born an eagle. The push was the greatest gift she had to offer. It was her supreme act of love. And so one by one she pushed them, and they flew!*

(McNally, 1990, p. xiv).



## Appendix D

### Esther's email 1.

**Sent:** Sunday, December 05 2005 8:08 PM

**Subject:** Memories

To Dear Mrs K,

Today I took a trip down memory lane. Being so caught up with the busy life of a teenager, with friends, parties, work, school, exams (the list goes on), today I realised the importance of taking a breath and reminiscing. Hours of endless study, left me longing for a break. A strange break it was, if you could even call it such. So off I ventured with mum, grinning widely at myself, no books in my hand, no calculator by my side, not even pencil in my ear. As I drove away from my study, (with my recently received learners permit) and arrived at what once was a huge part of my life. The brightness, fun, laughter, memories, stories, happiness, sadness, growing and developing all came flowing back to me as I turned the key. To some it would appear as a school's front door, to me it was my past – a past that had formed who it was that was holding the key.

Mrs Kelly, today I returned to my old school to help mum with the cleaning. It's not often I get the chance to go back there so today cleaning was a joy. It got me thinking and wondering; and amongst other precious memories you came to thought. Now, as a happy six-teen year old adolescent with many hopes and dreams, I realised without Ferndale school and your assistance I wouldn't be the person I am today. I love school. I love my friends. I love my family. I love life. I love what happened in my past.

Last week I sat my year 11 exams, A in English, A in Physical



*Education, A+ in Health and Human Development, and I haven't yet received my Biology, Maths Methods or Religious Education results. Tomorrow I sit my year 12 Accounting exam. I am nervous, but confident at the same time. I have put the time and effort into it and know I will do the best that I possibly can. In seven-teen days I fly out of the country. Yes, little Esther (I haven't grown since primary school) is facing the big wide world. I'm going to "Kiribati" a third world country up past Fiji. Kiribati is a group of islands where we learn how to live as they do, teach them in their schools and learn the values of their culture, which is wealth in happiness, rather than currency. I remember you had that value.*

*My purpose of writing today isn't to bore you with the details of my life, but rather to show my appreciation and thanks for assisting me to develop into the happy person I am today. You made me think beyond myself and my world. You gave me hope to be the person I wanted to be but would only have dreamed about.*

*I hope you're school is treating you well and that the children there realise how lucky they are. I admire you Mrs Kelly. You're a wonderful woman.*

*I wish you all the best in life. You changed the course of my life.*

*Love Esther*



## Appendix E

### Esther's email 2

**Sent: Wednesday, check day** December 06 2006 12:06PM

**Subject:** VCE Results

To Dear Mrs Kelly,

How are you? How's school and the family and everything? We are all well back here in the "Dale"... and I'm extra happy. I got my results yesterday morning. Woke up at 6.30 to discover that the internet didn't want to work. So at 9.30 mum took me into her work where we waited about 45 minutes for the site to load. Anyway to cut a long story short I got 94 and female dux for my school. Mum, Dad and the boys are all very proud as is most of Ferndale. Hopefully 94 and my regional bonus will be enough to get me into my course. I thought I would pass on the joy and thankyou again for everything you did for me throughout primary school.

I hope you and your family have a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I will keep in touch throughout uni.

Love Always

Esther xox



## **Appendix F**

### **The story of Arthur**

Arthur was another very dear friend of all the children.

He lived in a run-down old house (similar to many old deserted building in the town). He was constantly teasing the children about his football team which was certainly not the favoured one of the school community.

Arthur had a small win with Tattsлото and came to school to tell the children his news and asked for their advice in the spending of it. There was a consensus that he should renovate his home with the winnings, which he did. He told the children, he would keep a surprise for them with the money that was left over.

The years passed and Arthur continued to visit the school, share his stories, and help in the classrooms. The week before Arthur's beloved footy team was to play in the Grand Final, he was found dead in his house. As the children were preparing to attend his funeral, the undertaker arrived at the school announcing that Arthur had asked him to give them his surprise. As the undertaker took Arthur's coffin out of the hearse, the children burst into laughter. The coffin was painted in his football team colours with the emblem and team mascot on the top. The team's theme song played from the hearse sound system.

Arthur had kept some of his winnings to give the children a final surprise. He had the last laugh on them.





## Appendix G

### 'Keepers of the Story' project

Through this project initiative 'Keepers of the Story,' the students will create an environment where stories of the community are listened to and recorded for their community through the use of technological tools. This final publication will take three forms to provide the greatest amount of access for all community members and those beyond the community to access it. These include hard copy publication, web page and audio tapes/cds.

This project, 'Keepers of the Story,' is based on the following beliefs about learning.

- Students are natural learners and embrace technological learning with enthusiasm.
- Students learn more effectively when there is positive support, involvement and feedback from family, peers, school and the wider community.
- Students need to be encouraged to make decisions, solve problems and take risks with the understanding that their efforts are recognised and appreciated.
- A comprehensive, challenging curriculum must incorporate technology to ensure that students are being adequately equipped for their present and futures.
- Teachers must be flexible, open-minded and discerning regarding technology use within all areas of the curriculum.

Using Information and Communication Technologies as a tool for the gathering of the stories, it is intended that the students will:

- Record the stories of the community especially as told through the eyes of the senior members of the community
- Transcribe this history into a word document
- Take digital photos of the community



- Make short video recordings of interviews
- Select and scan relevant past media clippings
- Become skilled in web page design
- Create web page to document and distribute information
- Creatively publish a written record of the stories from the community

***Through this project:***

- student experiences will be authentic, modelled, creative, purposeful and involve opportunities for them to discover, take risks and learn actively through the use of computer technology, digital camera, tape recordings, scanner and web page design.
- learning initiative will include a balance of hands-on activities, group work, discussions, assignments, integration with other subjects, excursions and use of technological resources, all within the framework of a multi-age grouping.
- the literacy program will be enhanced.
- students will be involved in the application of knowledge, skills, experience and materials to create a valuable community resource.
- new ideas will be generated.
- students' skills will be developed in using technological equipment.
- students will develop their appreciation of the past, present and the future.

The students will develop their expertise in the following skills:

- organisational and decision making skills
- interview and recording voices on tape
- oral presentation skills
- keyboard, word processor and transcription skills
- photography and cameras handling skills
- layout skills
- downloading images
- pasting, modifying, colour touch ups to graphics



- creating digital video recordings with sound
- editing video recordings
- selection of media clippings
- scanning skills
- web page design and development
- basic database understanding
- computer based publication skills (e.g. PowerPoint presentations)
- publication skills-layout of hard copy, photocopying skills, binding skills

### *Features of the Initiative*

This initiative:

- is based on the belief that young people have the ability to share their joy in life with senior citizens.
- is based on the belief that young people have the ability to access the depth of resources within the hearts and minds of these people.
- taps into the precious resources of children to help keep the community and its unique culture alive.
- believes strongly that young people are capable of providing leadership to their community.
- believes in the value of documenting a community's history.
- recognizes that this community has no documentation of its own history and culture.

Documenting the oral history of the community will give an added meaning and depth to the students in the work they do with the senior members of their community.

The project demands teamwork. Students need to work together towards the end result. Resources will be pooled, with co-operation becoming the essential ingredient in the success of the initiative. Teachers will be inserviced in web page design and this information will then be passed onto the students to ensure the project reaches a wide audience through the use of the web and the printed word.



### *Desired Outcomes*

This initiative's final outcome rests on its being shared with others. The students will continuously document their progress on the web as a living record of their findings. The web page will include video clips of recordings being made and digital graphics of the community and its members. When completed, the students will have captured the oral stories of the senior citizens of their community. The students will share their progress through Ferndale's community newsletter, the school newsletter and the web page.

This initiative will:

- give the students an understanding of how can enhance any research they are willing to pursue.
- support students to use technology as part of their documenting of findings.
- give students skills that extend beyond the completion of the project.
- give students an understanding of the value of oral stories as indicators of the way people live their lives.
- give the students the opportunity to value their own life stories and recognize them as their own making of history and hence are valuable records of the continuing history and culture of the community.
- begin to develop web page publishing.

### *Sustainability*

- Due to the nature of a small rural community, this type of initiative can only succeed if the entire staff community shows interest and is willing to support the students. In all areas of school life, the staff work as a team to support each other, the students and the community.



- The initiative is about helping in the formation of intelligent people who can confront the problems around them, search out options and choose solutions for their own situations.
- As these students are exposed in a very direct way to the problems of the human condition, they need to use the interrelationships they have as the raw material for their own understanding of human beings.
- Teaching literacy through direct contact with the community and using technology to support the literacy learning has huge implications on the way of life within the classroom, impacting on the way teachers teach, how students learn, how parents understand and how the community relates to the school.
- The curriculum of Ferndale has to be opened far beyond the curriculum of the CSF documents and this initiative certainly does that.
- The skills and knowledge learnt through this initiative would need to be evaluated and clearly articulated.
- Linking school with past, present and future of a community's story provides some sense of meaning within the students' lives in a changing environment.
- Change impacts greatly on a small community and its students. Through technological skills and understandings of change gathered from this project, the students will be able to manage change in their own lives.
- Technology can help the school community move forward to an uncertain future with hope.
- Keeping the stories of the community of Ferndale, particularly for future generations, must be recognized as something sacred and must be part of the life and culture of this school.
- Through searching out the people and their stories from the past, students can excitedly move into the future with a knowledge and



understanding of their culture. This can only be achieved through the ongoing use of modern technology.

- There must be an inherent integration and unity between all technology.
- Students must be empowered with their own experiences and the role of the teacher is to give expression to these experiences.
- Learning is life-long and new technologies have the power and ability to ensure students know how to learn.
- Learning must be relevant.
- Within the context of an unknown future, learning how to learn is more important than learning any given subject matter.



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