

# **The Principal as Change Leader and Manager in and via the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children**

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## **Introduction**

Despite the extensive literature on the management of educational change (see for example Fullan, 2001, 2003), one constant in that literature is the consensus that such change is both complex and contextualised. A crucial consequence of that constant is the multiple fronts and levels on which school principals as change leaders and managers must engage with change, in order to bring about the most effective possible outcomes for students, families and communities.

It is this link between change at the levels of school, community and society with which this paper is concerned. The first-named author of the paper is the Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children (QSTSC), and the paper outlines how she operates as a change leader and manager, as well as some of the challenges and opportunities that she meets in doing so. The paper begins by outlining the context of her work, then moves to discuss her multiple roles as change agent in the school, in the show community and in Australian society more broadly.

## **Context**

The Queensland School for Travelling Show Children was established in 2000. This establishment was a significant milestone for the Australian show community – the members of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia and other people who travel the agricultural show circuits

to operate sideshow alley – the rides, such as ferris wheels, and amusements including ‘joints’, such as laughing clowns, games, stalls selling plush toys and canteens providing traditional fairy floss and dagwood dogs. While they travel the same circuits as the performers of equestrian displays, the two groups tend to lead relatively separate lives (Danaher, 2001), except in the school setting.

For generations the children of travelling showmen, itinerants and equestrian families received interrupted and inadequate schooling provision. In 1989, largely at the prompting of concerned parents within the show community, the then Queensland Department of Education set up a specialised program for show children provided as part of the Brisbane School of Distance Education (Danaher, 1998). While this served the children’s needs at the time, parents continued to lobby for a separate school that would engage specifically with the distinctive learning situations of children from occupationally mobile families. This lobbying led to the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, which caters for children in Preschool to Year Seven.

Since its inception in 2000, QSTSC has quickly established a highly visible profile through its two large mobile classrooms that follow the different agricultural show circuits throughout eastern and central Australia. These classrooms usually park in the grounds of a local school while the show is in town and their satellite dishes enable Internet access to a set of computers. Each classroom has two classroom teachers and an Operations Officer who combines the duties of driver, janitor, computer technician and teacher aide. In addition to the Principal, who travels regularly to each classroom and other sites, the school employs a part-time administrative officer. The school has an office and a small library in a classroom block at the Upper Mount

Gravatt State School (QSTSC coming under the jurisdiction of the Mount Gravatt District of Education Queensland) (Moriarty, Danaher, Kenny & Danaher, 2003).

### **The school**

The Principal's role as change agent in the school derives from the fact that she was a foundation member of the Brisbane School of Distance Education team of teachers who established the program for show children in 1989. Since that time, she has worked continuously with the children and their parents as teacher and more recently as foundation Principal of QSTSC. That continuity has generated the rapport and trust between the Principal and the show community that are crucial for the school's sustainability.

Part of the Principal's role as change agent in the school has focused on shared understandings by establishing and reinforcing the routines and regimes associated with a 'mainstream' school. Examples include knowledge of the physical settings and building usage of schools, punctuality and bell times, reviewing safe play and playground practices, including personal introductions to local school principal and staff members, wearing a school uniform, borrowing library books, knowledge of and familiarity with administrative requirements like permission forms for excursions, parent transport rosters and homework regimes.

Another element of the Principal's role is leading and managing the teachers and support staff members. She needs to facilitate their induction into a way of life that they have not previously experienced, and at the same time to support their insistence on high standards of achievement and behavior by the children. She also needs to manage mobility of school resources in both intra and interstate locations, to supervise administrative accountabilities and to oversee the maintenance of the mobile classrooms, vehicles and the information technology network.

A third element of the Principal's role is to lead and manage change in her interactions with line managers, bureaucrats and interagency bureaucracies. As an Education Queensland school, QSTSC must conform to regulations that might not initially or necessarily take account of its mobility or its unique facilities. For instance, state primary schools do not usually register semi-trailers.

The Principal has been fortunate in being able to enlist the understanding and support of influential individuals who have endorsed and enabled her role as change leader and manager. One of these individuals is her line manager, the Executive Director (Schools) in the Mount Gravatt District of Education Queensland in which QSTSC is located. Others have included a vast array of people in the bureaucracy, as well as managers of corporate businesses who have seen the potential benefits of contributing to school equipment and infrastructure.

At the QSTSC level, then, the Principal has led and managed change centered on establishing the school as fulfilling simultaneously two key functions. One is providing continuous, formal education to travelling children and their families that was not available to previous generations. The other is ensuring that the school fulfils the requirements of Education Queensland for all its schools. Negotiating ways forward so that these functions are complementary rather than contradictory requires considerable skill on the Principal's part – not least because doing so is a radical change also to the roles and responsibilities of Principal of an Education Queensland state primary school.

### **The show community**

A number of changes have taken place within the show community as a direct result of the establishment of QSTSC. These changes may be evident only to people who had inside knowledge of how the community operated prior to 2000. As we noted above, the Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children had taught the show children who had studied through the Brisbane School of Distance Education. Like other teachers from that school, she had regularly met the children and their families when the show stopped several times each year in towns where they were located for a week or more. During this time, she had become well acquainted with the children, their families and the show lifestyle.

For show children who had never attended regular school and for their parents, many of whom also did not have regular schooling, the establishment of QSTSC brought changes to their day-to-day living that were quite marked. The morning routine of packing lunches, getting dressed for school, travelling to and from school at regular times each day, and completing and submitting homework not only were major changes in their lives but also disrupted the way that life was conducted before. At one level, it could be considered that coping with these changes was the domain of the show families but, realistically, it would be difficult for the Principal not to realise that the extent to which families coped would impact on the success that the children had at school. As a leader and manager of change in this context, therefore, the Principal had to acknowledge the contribution that families made in order to provide their children with the education that they had for so long strived.

Another way to analyse the impact of this change on families is to ask what these new routines were replacing. Time at all levels of the family structure had to be reallocated or rearranged. Depending on their particular circumstances, ensuring attendance at school might mean driving

overnight to the next school location, getting up earlier and being more regimented. One change that really needs to be given considerable thought, however, is that families no longer have as much time to take part in rich cultural activities, such as telling old show stories around the campfire at night. Occasions such as those were important for passing on stories from one generation to the next, for families to bond in their love of the travelling show lifestyle.

The school meant that families had more to pack into their day. The reason why this aspect needs further consideration is to determine whether and how families are able to retain their cultural heritage while they gain more education. One option has been for the Principal and teachers to consider and implement strategies in which the rich cultural heritage can still be passed down through the generations but in ways that promote literacy at the same time. We have been impressed by the extent to which the children attending the school have developed strong dispositions towards literacy through their involvement in rich, innovative, fully integrated, quality curricula, such as the production of newsletters, the weekly Postcard and culminating activities arising at the completion of studies which reflect the vitality and values of the school community. When the books that they ordered through the book club arrive at school, the event is met with levels of anticipation and excitement. The QSTSC curriculum takes advantage of these dispositions and links them to the need to maintain the culture and, perhaps at the same time, to approach the problem of low formal literacy levels in some of the adults. This process has involved the Principal's expanding her current role of leading and managing change in the show community. Given that it is such a closely knit community and that there would be a desire to retain this closeness, many exciting possibilities continue to come to mind.

## **Australian society**

The Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, more generally, promotes change within the Australian community as a whole. The school challenges the idea that school education is based in some permanent dwelling attached to a fixed location that serves the needs of a residentially settled community. That view of education has informed schooling for centuries. Students have been expected to come to school and fit in with its spatial and temporal routines. In the case of boarding schools, that has meant living away from home for long periods of time; in other cases, it has involved fitting in with daily routines of catching the 'bus or arranging transport. The alternative arrangements of correspondence lessons or moving from school to school as the show circuit moves from town to town have been regarded as less satisfactory options.

QSTSC is innovative in the sense that the school comes with the show, fitting in with its spatial and temporal arrangements. This innovativeness provides a model for offering education for people for whom the concept of a permanent base in a fixed location does not apply.

At the same time, QSTSC provides a setting in which its pupils' educational experiences are regularised and stabilised. The fact that the travelling school is located within the grounds of a local school from the community through which it travels, rather than on the showgrounds helps to convey the sense that the school is part of the broader educational framework. This process is facilitated also by the provision of such markers of identity as a school uniform, hats, school song, library bags, school assemblies, academic displays, culminating events and presentations, annual prize presentation nights, Student Council elections and meetings, Parents' and Citizens' meetings and fund raising activities, teachers' professional development and parent training activities. These markers of identity demonstrate that QSTSC works to

incorporate a sense of a broader educational community within the lived experience of a group previously displaced from this frame of reference. In other words, QSTSC provides a compromise between the needs of the show community and the broader agenda of the Australian community to have a relatively standard school experience available for all its children.

Similarly, the QSTSC has helped to lead and manage changing attitudes within the Australian community towards the education of the children of the travelling show community. In negotiating the establishment of the school with federal and state governments, she stressed the inclusivist benefits of such an innovation. This capacity for negotiation constitutes a vital component of the Principal's repertoire of skills in her role as change leader and manager as she lobbied for alternative and new understandings of what 'school' is and for whom it exists.

Media coverage has also played a role in bringing the school to the attention of the Australian community. A recent example was a report on the ABC television program *George Negus Tonight* (2 August 2004). The challenge has been to promote an understanding of the distinctive lifestyle of the show children, which creates particular challenges for their schooling, while avoiding trivialising, exoticising or alarmist representations of the community as consisting of frivolous entertainment or unsettled and untrustworthy characters. In this sense, the school and its Principal contribute to the education of the Australian community at large, facilitating a change in attitude towards the show community and their lifestyle.

## **Conclusion**

According to Fullan (1997), "the hopeful change agent" needs to participate

...in the politics of altering the structural conditions of schools so that reforms and quality have a greater chance of being built into the daily experiences of the majority of educators and students. (p. 217)

On the evidence presented here, the Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children is preeminently a “hopeful change agent”. In engaging with the challenges and opportunities outlined above as she enacts the role of change leader and manager, she demonstrates on a daily basis her determination to work with several others to create new possibilities for the show children and their families. Through her many roles as change agent in the school, in the school community and in Australian society more generally, she demonstrates also her optimism that these new possibilities are achievable, and moreover that they will lead to qualitatively and substantively improved learning outcomes at these multiple levels. We endorse her view and we wish the school and her well in achieving that vision.

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