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The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.
Foreword

Education is a fundamental building block for our nation. If Australia’s future prosperity is to continue, quality teachers and leaders are essential, indeed critical, across all sectors of education - from the early childhood years, through primary and secondary schooling, the vocational education sector and in our universities. School teachers, and leaders in particular, have one of the most important responsibilities of any profession – they are entrusted with the education of our children.

Research has shown that after parenting, the quality of teaching is the single most important factor in a student’s education. Further, leadership is second to teaching as the major school-based influence on student learning. The quality of school leadership plays a vital role in supporting the learning needs of students and fostering their success.

School leaders must not only motivate, influence and inspire, but also facilitate change and innovation in their schools. Principals are the CEOs of their schools, and like CEOs they must oversee an efficient and successful business, mediate tensions between competing demands and pressures and deliver a high quality education we expect for all students.

Australian Government policies firmly support the development of professional standards for teachers and school leaders by providing $30 million over five years to Teaching Australia – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, to raise the status, quality and professionalism of teachers and school leaders throughout Australia.

It gives me great pleasure to commend to you Leading Australia’s Schools, produced by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders under the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme. This book celebrates the achievements of principals nationally by capturing their enthusiasm and commitment to their profession and their students.

Through their particular examples these seventeen leaders have enriched the lives of many students and their staff and wider school communities. Their stories of inspirational leadership capture the passion, energy and commitment of Australia’s school leaders to provide quality educational outcomes for all Australian school students. They are just seventeen of the valued leaders in more than 10,000 schools across Australia. I thank them for their contribution and for the strong future they are helping to create for all of us.

I hope their examples will encourage a new generation of teachers on their leadership journey and the next generation of our students who aspire to be teachers.

The Hon. Julie Bishop MP
Minister for Education, Science and Training
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The Writers
This is a book of remarkable stories. Stories of people who have dedicated their lives to making a difference for students. At a time when there is intense interest in schools by government, the media and the general public, it is important to hear the voices of the people who lead our schools to help us understand why they devote more than sixty hours a week to a job with a level of complexity and responsibility found in few occupations.

Being the principal of a school is one of the most important roles in our society. Principals make a difference to the lives of students, as they can help lift a school to extraordinary heights where students are able to perform at a level higher than would normally be expected (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Tony Considine at Thursday Island High School in the Torres Strait, and John Fleming at Bellfield Primary School in Melbourne, show that it doesn’t matter what level of disadvantage exists in a community, students can be provided with a school environment that allows them to be the equal of any. Under the guidance of expert principals, schools can be inviting, exciting, purposeful and humane places that students want to go to. As Lynne Hinton comments:

Our kids enjoy coming to school. But more than that, there is a real sense of purpose about what the kids are doing. A sense that they are here for a reason, and that is to learn.

Principals directly influence the work of teachers, providing them with the inspiration, direction, capacities and working environment to ensure that all their students can achieve to their full potential (Gurr, Drysdale & Mulford, 2006). In talking to many principals though, it can be difficult to discover their stories, as they tend to want to talk more about the school staff and what they have been doing. The writing of David Wood’s chapter is an example of this, for in David we find someone who genuinely downplays his role as the foundation principal in the development of a highly regarded school.

Principals provide support, advice and a warm smile for parents and they often influence the wider community; Rhonda Brain taught a town to read!
Their work is complex (Mulford, Silins & Leithwood, 2004). Jodee Wilson uses the term ‘chaos’ to describe her work and sees herself as human resource facilitator, educational expert and a symbolic chief, whilst at the same time making sure her school operates smoothly. Sister Geraldine, the principal at a small Catholic school for young teenage girls experiencing serious behavioural and emotional issues, describes her multiple roles as spiritual head, social worker, and educational leader. Yet despite the demands of these multiple roles and sustaining a small special-setting school, Sister Geraldine sees her work as a privilege:

It’s a privilege to be trusted by them [the students] and work with them to get the best outcomes. It’s a privilege to see them grow day by day at school, to see them improve their behaviour outside school, to see their life in the family improve, to see conflict replaced by harmony. It’s a privilege to help them live their lives more fully the way God wants them to live – to reach a greater fullness of life. That is the biggest reward.

It is a job with many tensions and dilemmas that need to be balanced (Duignan, 2006). Mark Doecke at Yirara College explains the tensions involved in connecting with the school community, and how the clearly-expressed school values and beliefs help resolve these:

One of my hopes for the college is that Aboriginal people will feel free to visit, chat, perhaps offer their services for some paid or unpaid work, and that we can accommodate that, as inconvenient as it may be. Yes, there will be tensions. For example, the needs of family versus the needs for education for the right behaviour. But let us not flee from those tensions, but deal with them in a spirit of openness and love, without compromising our values and beliefs. For it is our strong values and beliefs that are our strength.

Fundamentally though, being a principal is an exhilarating job, one full of possibilities and hope, one that few of us can do, but which, when done well, is one of the most satisfying of all. As John Fleming says:

I love my job, I love it. It is not all hard work and drudgery, and ‘how am I going to get through it?’ It is actually exhilarating.

The principals described here are all highly regarded within the profession and by their school and wider community. Many have received significant awards, including three who received Orders of Australia (Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, Rhonda Brain, Bella Irlich). They often lead complicated, dynamic and multi-faceted lives; Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann is described by Julie Wells as leader, politician, artist and educator. They represent a snapshot of the more than ten thousand principals in Australian schools. Their stories are presented here to capture some of the exhilaration of being a principal and to perhaps inspire the current generation of teachers to become principals.

Australian schools are some of the most diverse in the world. Nearly two-thirds of students attend government schools, twenty per cent Catholic schools and the remainder a diverse selection of independent schools, often with a strong connection to
a religion. Our schools compare well with those in other countries, with, for example, Australian performance in international studies of literacy and numeracy amongst the highest. This diversity and performance is a cause for celebration. It also emphasises the complexity of being a principal, and the difficulty in a book of this type to capture the richness of the Australian educational landscape.

Selection for inclusion in this book was through a process of peer recommendation using the networks of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, principal associations, and in consultation with the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). All States and Territories are represented by at least two principals, with eleven principals from government, five from Catholic and one from independent schools. Primary, secondary, special and special-setting schools are all represented. There are eleven female and six male principals, from many different backgrounds, including Miriam Rose-Bauman, an exceptional indigenous principal. All have experienced being a principal from six to thirty-six years, and all have at least five years at the school that is the main focus of their chapter.

The writers of the chapters were selected through a similar process, being nominated through the affiliate network of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders. All have an extensive background in writing on educational issues (brief biographies are included at the end of this book). Each brings his or her own style to the task, providing a richness of perspective. In working with their allocated principal, each writer was asked to consider:

1. The principal’s background;
2. Why they became a principal and what the principalship means to them;
3. Key accomplishments/contributions and their personal and professional satisfactions from the job;
4. The key challenges of the job;
5. How and why they feel they make a difference in their schools, school community, wider society, perhaps with a story illustrating this; and
6. Their hopes/aspirations for the future.

We want to thank the principals for their bravery, honesty and inspirational stories. To the writers, we owe a debt for presenting the stories of these outstanding principals. To the Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Department of Education, Science and Training, and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, we thank you for the courage, patience, and commitment to this project.

As you read these chapters, reflect upon and gain inspiration from the stories. For principals, enjoy the experiences of your colleagues. For those teaching in schools, consider whether you too could be someone who makes a significant difference to the lives of young people.

References


Lynne Hinton is a principal with a passion for learning and this has been fundamental to her success in transforming Buranda Primary School into an inspiring learning community. As a principal, Lynne believes that her role is to inquire, to learn and transfer her passion to the teachers and students.

Lynne has created a thriving learning community since becoming principal at Buranda Primary School in 1996. Then a failing school with 48 students and a falling enrolment, Buranda now has 200 students and a waiting list. The students have the normal range of abilities and backgrounds for an inner city school. However, for the last six years with Lynne as their leader, they have achieved results well above state and national means in all aspects of literacy and numeracy. Her teachers have become expert in innovative pedagogies and, for example, they not only teach Philosophy for Children but also train other teachers and help them implement this program in Australia and internationally.

What makes Lynne most proud of her school is that the children at Buranda Primary School also have a passion for learning. As Lynne states:

"Our kids enjoy coming to school. But more than that, there is a real sense of purpose about what the kids are doing, a sense that they are here for a reason, and that is to learn."

Last week I had a visitor from a school in Auckland. She flew over for three days especially to visit us. She was completely overawed by what she calls the ‘ambience’ of the place. People describe it differently - the ‘spirit’, the ‘tone’ etc, but they are referring to the fact that the children are
happy, exuberant, open, confident, and have an insatiable curiosity about their learning.

As well as being full of fun and energy about learning, the students are also calm, gentle and peaceful: ‘Students are thoughtful. They think about other people.’ There is little or no bullying at the school because the children will not allow it. Recently a group of Year 7 students went to the principal to discuss what they described as an ‘unacceptable act of bullying’. They outlined behaviour they had witnessed that they thought was inappropriate and unkind, and together with the principal discussed what steps could be taken to address the problem. The situation was resolved amicably.

Throughout Lynne’s 15 years as a classroom teacher she pursued her passion for learning and experimenting with new ideas, with this becoming the cornerstone of her principalship. This passion began with a sense of curiosity and wonder and a love of the interesting and unforeseen. For example, in 1995, she completed a Masters degree in Mathematics teaching for ESL students that was based on this preference. She explains:

I love the ordered, organised, sequenced nature of maths teaching, juxtaposed by notions such as chaos theory, the unexpected, the surprising, the quirky and the paradoxical. I really like helping children see the sense in numbers so they can take control of it for themselves.

Her curiosity and wonder is transmitted to her students. She puts on the school walls quirky maths problems that students love to grapple with:

A barber in a small town claims to shave all the people who don’t shave themselves and not to shave all those who shave themselves. Who shaves the barber? One student suggested an unexpected answer – the barber is a female and doesn’t shave!

She celebrates the unexpectedness of learning. For example, she recently discovered a cartoon that one of her students had doodled in the margin of a book and published this in the school newsletter. It depicted two stick figures, the first of which had the traditional O for a head while the second had a U for a head. The first figure was saying, ‘You have a really open mind.’

Lynne’s passion for learning comes not only from the hunger to inquire and look deeper into what is possible, but also from faith in everybody’s ability to learn, to take risks and try new things. Even as a new teacher she believed that she could do anything!

I remember one principal I had - I’d go into his office and say excitedly, ‘I’ve got an idea!’ and he’d laugh and say, ‘No! Not another idea! No more ideas!’ Funny thing is, that, these days, I have the same response from my administration officer.

Furthermore, she was willing to take a risk and had faith in her ability to learn whatever was needed to implement a new idea.
Leading learning in her school

She was also passionate about facilitating and supporting the learning of her students. There is as much excitement in helping others to learn something new as there is in learning something new for herself. So for Lynne, teaching is an inquiry into inquiry: she wants to explore how to learn and how to facilitate learning.

Lynne took her excitement in facilitating learning in the classroom and wondered what it would be like to take this to the whole school. She even had an idea, developed from her interest in Philosophy for Children, of what such a school might be like:

In my imagination was a place where children could think clearly and well, and have confidence in their own ideas, where they listened to one another and respected each other’s ideas. I imagined a place where children were reflective and thoughtful, where they enjoyed their learning, were successful, and were happy. I wondered if such a place was possible. Plato said, ‘Philosophy begins in wonder.’ Small children wonder about everything, so philosophy at primary school seemed like a place to begin.

In 1995 she took up the position of deputy head and then became acting principal. In 1996 she commenced her principalship at Buranda and then began her inquiry into the central question: How could she facilitate the learning of a whole school, not just one class?

Her first attempt at being a principal was based on trying to fit herself into what she then saw as the role of the principal:

I just thought there was a role called ‘principal’ that I had to learn. I thought people turned into principals when they learned the right responses and systems. ‘What would a principal do in this instance?’ was what I thought of when decisions needed to be made.

At this point Lynne was trying to follow the rules for being a good principal. Despite this not being an entirely comfortable fit, this was what she thought a principal should do:

When I first started the job I guess I felt a bit ‘restrained’. A sense of ‘Is this what it’s all about?’ Not satisfying really.

An exceptional principal: Asking why

Lynne might have carried on being an ordinary, average principal. However, as she says, ‘Life turned an unexpected corner’. A major life event was the catalyst for her to re-evaluate what she was doing and take the courage to challenge the norm and do what she saw was right. She abandoned her first view of what a principal was. The exhilaration of learning was what really mattered, not managing a school.

When I came back to work several months later I felt differently. I decided that the important thing was not the role itself, but the person doing it. Instead of asking, ‘What would a principal do?’ I asked, ‘What do I want to do?’ Instead of me altering to become a principal, the role of principal
altered to suit me. We’re probably talking about the difference between management and leadership. For the first 10 weeks I was a manager, then perhaps I turned into a leader!

She came back a new principal and continued her journey of inquiry by moving in a new direction. She saw she had lost her vision while doing what she was ‘meant to do’ as a principal. Being a principal is about making the core business of a school happen: quality teaching and learning. Rather than asking, ‘What would a good principal do?’ and sticking with tried and true answers, she asked, ‘How can I promote good learning in the school?’ and began to take some risks:

I took risks in the eyes of the establishment, I suppose, but it was always with what I perceived to be everyone’s best interests at heart. I always thought that, if what I was doing wasn’t liked, the worst that would happen is that I would get the sack, and I didn’t really mind about that. Very empowering!

Her biggest risk was implementing Philosophy for Children across the whole school. Although she was not certain whether it would work, she trusted her intuition. She believed pedagogy based on inquiry and fuelled by students’ natural curiosity and wonder would be successful, and it was. Now, students at Buranda make progress by raising and exploring questions such as: Can time stop? What is change? What is the meaning of life?

Lynne has put teaching and learning at the centre of what she does as a principal. She created herself as an educational or pedagogical leader (Lindgard et al., 2003). Her work as a principal, from the point of her new concept of leadership onwards, has been based on pedagogical and educational goals rather than managerial ones. Quality learning and inquiry are her compass and her bottom line. She can use this compass to direct her towards what is really important in her school.

Having enhancement of learning as the foundation for her leadership decisions did not mean that Lynne created a strategic plan or long-term goals. Instead she saw herself as inquiring into problems as they arose one at a time: ‘I wonder if this might work... How might we go about solving this one...?’

Despite making decisions about issues as they have arisen, each decision has been made from a clear vision of education and what it is to be a principal. Lynne was and is able to make decisions based on what she takes to be important, without being distracted by the unimportant details or issues. This means the buildings of the school may become a bit shabby because, instead of spending time and money to make the school look good, she spends time and money on training her teachers – up to 65 per cent of the discretionary budget, in fact. Although having the best facilities money can buy would be nice, Lynne believes that, as long as the rooms are serviceable, it is the quality of the teachers that will make the biggest difference in the learning of students.

Lynne also uses her clear vision to devote the time and energy of the school to what the school does well. She does not try to implement every educational innovation that circulates through Australian schools. Lynne has taken the time needed for philosophy to become part of the culture of the school and for it to have had a profound effect on
the students, and meanwhile she has said ‘no’ to anything that detracts from this.

Having a vision in place did not make the job easy, however. There are always new challenges and problems. This can be frustrating and sometimes daunting. Yet this is part of what it is to be participating in an inquiry – always seeking new challenges and questions.

**Leadership as inquiry**

With her vision firmly in place, she could get back to the real inquiry into being a principal. The key question was not ‘What is it to be a good principal?’ This question had just distracted her from the core purpose of education. Instead, the question was the same for her as a principal as it had been for her as a classroom teacher: ‘How can I make learning exciting, challenging and surprising?’ The model of leadership that Lynne created presented leadership as a type of inquiry: an inquiry into what makes good learning and how to make it happen.

The best answers to what makes good learning can be found by examining the ideal classroom. An ideal classroom for Lynne was, and still is, a place where students and teachers have a passion for thinking, learning and inquiring. Students still have to learn number facts and spelling. This is necessary for effective learning. Yet the teacher also has to lead learning through creating an environment of questioning, wondering, imagining, puzzling and ‘ah-ha’ moments. This leading of learning is shown by the questions she asks, such as: ‘What weighs more, one kilogram of potatoes or one kilogram of feathers?’ And it is shown by the answers she receives from students after they carefully consider her questions: ‘The feathers, because the birds might still be attached.’

To create such a classroom, Lynne had to facilitate the learning of her students. Her role as a principal is now an extension of this concept of facilitation. As principal she now facilitates the learning of all in the school. She has created a supportive, challenging, inquiring environment and now she only has to intervene to deal with problems that threaten to undermine the learning culture of the school.

To support the teachers in creating a passionate and inquiring learning environment, Lynne has helped her teachers design a collaborative vision of what they wanted for the school and then promoted further inquiry into how to achieve and improve this vision. She started with the passion for teaching and learning that her teachers already had. When she became the principal, one of the two teachers in the school was passionate about real life learning, and the other was passionate about multi-age classrooms. Lynne added her own interest in Philosophy for Children to the mix. This formed the beginning vision, which was developed with the addition of new teachers as the school grew. Philosophical inquiry and environmental learning in multi-age classrooms became the foundation for the learning in the school. Continuous inquiry into how to achieve the collaborative vision helped the teachers stay focused on their prime job of developing learning.

Teachers are now expected to be excited by learning and are supported in creating this excitement. New teachers are mentored through this process. A good example is a new teacher in the school. Lynne has fostered his passion for learning. He comes to her and asks excitedly, ‘Can I try this out in the pool and see if it floats? If I do a risk
assessment, can we make catapults?"

Despite a shared vision, sometimes the teachers would become lost or bogged down. Then Lynne’s job is to remind them of their vision. She uses this approach to bring them back to their own excitement for learning:

I think it’s hard for teachers to stay focused on this, given the day-to-day things they have to deal with (who has head lice this week?). It’s the leader’s job to keep refocusing people. To refocus those of us who once knew where we were going, and to allow the new ones into the club.

A second way in which Lynne facilitates the school being a community of inquiry is to create an environment of care and trust. She believes that, without the school being a safe and open place, good learning is unlikely to occur.

In part, Lynne has created an environment of safety and openness by being a key person the children can trust. For example, she has a permanently open door policy. Students can stop her or can come into her office anytime to chat about their learning or their lives. She is never too busy for a child:

Kids come in here and ask for a clue to the maths problems I have put on the wall, tell me about someone being unkind to someone else, or state that for every right answer there is an infinite number of wrong ones.

Another way Lynne made the school a safe place to learn and inquire was by making the school a predictable environment for students. For example, she had a grade six student who was struggling with anxiety. The student felt safe to email Lynne and say, ‘I’m scared about going to school.’ Lynne supported the child through a tough patch. Later the child emailed her, saying, ‘I’m doing OK now.’

This same trust and safety is provided for the teachers as well as the students. Lynne trusts them as professionals. Risk-taking in their learning, teaching and inquiring is encouraged and there is no blame if things go wrong.

Lynne’s approachability and her emphasis on trust and safety are based on the perspective that she is no better or worse than anyone else – she might have bigger responsibilities and accountabilities, but this does not make her a better person. She is constantly aware that others in the school – teachers and students – might have better ideas and answers than her own, and she seeks out these ideas. Because of this, risk-taking and sharing of diverse views are encouraged.

Everyone in the school is a learner and a person. This is important to avoid an ‘us’ and ‘them’ model of teaching where the students are treated differently from the teachers. This model can set up conflicts between the two groups. Instead, at Buranda, everyone is a learner and some learners are responsible for improving the learning of others.

Creating a safe environment was not enough, however, to fulfil Lynne’s role as an educational leader. A safe environment is important but it is never enough for quality learning. She also had to make sure the learning in the school was challenging and rigorous. Because learning is so important, Lynne creates a safe environment and holds high expectations of everyone in the school. She provides a ‘warm demandingness’ (Lindgard et al., 2001). These high expectations are her gifts to students and teachers. She believes they can achieve more, then they believe, and then they do.

Students are trusted to manage and create their own learning. At one point students
Lynne Hinton

had been crossing the bridge near the school and noticed lots of dead fish in the water. They came to Lynne and she asked them, ‘What are you going to do?’ They wrote to the city council, the newspaper, their member of State Parliament, and the Environment Protection Agency (EPA). As a result they had an article and photo in the newspaper, and the EPA did a study of the waterway and made a presentation to the students about what chemicals were found, and their effects and likely sources. When the Minister for the Environment came to the school, she was presented with a petition to clean up the river, and this petition was lodged in Parliament. As a result of their efforts, the river was cleaned up.

Maintaining the passion for inquiry

Lynne makes sure the environment at Buranda is intellectually challenging for teachers and students alike, as this is the best way to ensure deep learning. Although there is no blame if things go wrong when taking a risk, the teachers are pushed to constantly challenge themselves and develop their professional skills and knowledge. For example, all the teachers are required to undergo the extra training required to obtain a qualification to teach Philosophy for Children, and many also have the advanced certificate which enables them to train other teachers. Lynne comments that:

People sometimes say to me, ‘It is easy for you: you get all the good teachers.’ They come here and they get better because they are expected to. Everyone is constantly striving to improve, particularly in the area of philosophy and pedagogy. It makes for a dynamic, competent energetic group of people. That’s exciting. I guess, then, that the role of the leader is to make sure that everyone is heading the same direction as a cohesive whole. Pretty daunting.

Lynne’s inquiry as a principal is ongoing. Because she has created Buranda as a learning school, she is always seeking new challenges, new problems, new questions, and new inquiries. For example, a recent challenge was that the school was getting a little stale – ‘The fierceness had gone out of the work.’ To resolve this, Lynne turned it into an occasion for inquiry with the teachers about who they were and where they were going:

One of the things I have to think about is the need to keep reminding us who we are and keeping the focus for everyone. How do we stay the best? How do I ensure that people new to the school – teachers, parents – know our story? I also have to think about what happens when I go. Even though there is a huge amount of expertise here, a new principal is likely to come in with different ideas and priorities and change everything. There is no requirement for them to keep anything the way it is.

So is there a secret to Lynne’s success? Lynne is modest about this. She still feels humble and daunted by some of the challenges, and to a certain extent she sees herself as still learning. She started as a learner:

There was nothing expert about me in the beginning. The only difference between me and the others was that it was my head if things went wrong.
But I never mind about that.

And she continues as a learner:

All my staff have more expertise than me in many areas. We all need each other! Don’t ask me any questions about rolling over financial journals!

Although she realises that she has learned a great deal compared to what she knew before, or where other principals may be, she still sees herself as a learner, with all the humility that this involves.

The differences she sees between what she does as a principal and what some others do she accounts for as a matter of personality and experience:

I still think it’s a job that really has to come naturally to a large degree. Sure there are things that can be taught, but only to the right people. A good leader needs courage, compassion and determination. They need to be flexible, patient and humble. They need to genuinely like people and be prepared to strive for the best on their own and other people’s behalf. Energy, enthusiasm, commitment!

However, this view glosses over what is truly inspiring about Lynne’s achievements. She may not see herself as the all-knowing expert who has ‘made it’, because she still sees opportunities for learning and inquiry. But what Lynne has achieved cannot be merely attributed to her personality or experience. This would ignore the risks and challenges she has deliberately sought and embraced. A better explanation is that she has consciously created herself as a learner and inquirer. She has allowed herself to be ruled by her passion for learning, come what may. She has pushed through the problems and challenges where many would have given up and taken the safe traditional road. She has taken risks. She has learned and allowed others to learn. She has built something significant.

Lynne’s success is built from regarding leading as inquiry. What Lynne’s success demonstrates is not so much about her personality as about her attitude to learning. Being a passionate learner is essential to being a principal.

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