

Plenary Address by

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to the

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“Does the Child Still Exist?”

Fellow Educators,

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land on which we are meeting.

This morning I would like to challenge you as school leaders to re-think the notion of childhood and to question not only if you believe your construct of the child still exists but whether you can recognise the child of today.

I say this because, like Mayall, I believe that “children’s lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what children are and should be”.¹

Certainly we could argue that in this changing world childhood, as we remember it, that time buried in our nostalgic imaginings, does not exist. Yet, perhaps it does. Perhaps it has just been re-interpreted and re-contextualised through different lived experiences.

Perhaps it is up to us as educators to pause, to re-evaluate exactly how we conceptualise what it means to be a child, and to examine how these conceptions shape our pedagogical beliefs and leadership.

For some of us, a child is an innocent who lives in the golden age of life. This construct has an illustrious list of supporters including the French philosopher Rousseau, the English romantic poet Wordsworth who spoke of children as trailing clouds of glory from God who is their home and even American country and western singer Patsy Cline who summed up every congratulations card to new parents in the lyrics of one of her hits, ***If I could see the world through the eyes of a child:***

*If I could see the world through the eyes of a child
What a wonderful world this would be
There'd be no trouble and no strife
Just a big happy life
With a bluebird in every tree*

*I could see right nor wrong
I could see good nor bad
I could see all the good things in life I've never had.*

*If I could see the world through the eyes of a child
What a wonderful world this would be.*

*If I could see the world through the eyes of a child
Smiling faces would greet me all the while
Like a lovely work of art
It would warm my weary heart
Just to see through the eyes of a child.
I could see right nor wrong*

*I could see good nor bad
I could see all the good things in life I've never had.*

*If I could see the world through the eyes of a child
What a wonderful world this would be.*

Adults who hold this view argue that the child must be protected from a society that seeks to corrupt such innocence.

For others, children are seen in terms of the 'empty vessel' needing to be 'filled' with knowledge and skills so as to grow up wise and obedient to the ways of society.

A third view sees the child in terms of an innate process of ages and stages in a ladder of progression to adulthood. This view, espoused by such people as Piaget, makes little reference to the collective impacts of culture, history or environment.

A fourth version, and the one on which I base my comments this morning, envisages the child as an active participant in the construction of its identity, knowledge and culture.

From this viewpoint we might begin to ask the questions concerning what it means to be born into our hi-tech, information-rich, fast-paced society.

Does this era truly signify the loss of innocence and the disappearance of some definitions and concepts of childhood that might still define our approaches to teaching and learning?

Radical technologies and social media have permeated our very existence to the extent that traditional boundaries between child- and adulthood are almost non-existent, or perhaps, as Dr Seuss articulates, "Adults are obsolete children."ⁱⁱ

The once accepted structures of daily life have changed. Rather like using a remote control – we switch contexts, environments, and roles often in a matter of moments.

We are, as the postmodernists like to claimⁱⁱⁱ, multi-phrenic selves – a complex, evolving species with major identity crises! Or we are not.

As we see with today's young people, most of us appear to have an incredible ability to adapt.

"We have learned to grasp quickly. We can read signs, change lanes and avoid other vehicles at seventy miles per hour while also listening to a song and planning our weekend... Things come at us at a rate our ancestors could not have imagined, and we handle them."^{iv}

But what are the repercussions of living life with such haste?

On the one hand there is the issue that children of the 21st century are considered to be more autonomous, capable of expressing their views and informed decision-makers.

On the other, children are rushed through their perceived developmental stages into a false sense of maturity.

Themes that were once considered out of children's domain are now filtered in through language and sometimes sexualised imagery.

Furthermore teen magazines 'legitimise' all that is seen on the screen by translating it into all-you-can-read text on bright glossy pages.

Edutainment concepts are opportunities for rampant commercial exploitation and children are targets of massive marketing campaigns.

Television advertising is also high-powered entertainment that seduces young viewers with sequences of vibrant, flashing colour, action and humour ensuring continued success for global brand names and moulds what is perceived as 'cool' and 'hip' and 'necessary' to be a child today.

While toys and clothing may feature widely, a study carried out by Adelaide's Flinder's University indicates that "80 per cent of advertisements for food shown during children's television programs promote junk food such as soft drink and biscuits."^v

Indeed, the fast food diet has become a major concern in contemporary society. Twenty-five to thirty per cent of Australian children aged between seven and fifteen are overweight or obese^{vi}.

According to Ian Caterson^{vii}, professor of human nutrition at Sydney University, the increase in children's weight gain has doubled in the past ten years and now equals that of children in the United States.

Researchers also argue that the types of chemicals children are now exposed to can lead to the premature onset of puberty.^{viii}

Pressures on children today are intense. They may be relatively free to choose and have a UN charter that aims to protect their rights but how often are children's 'rights' determined by care-givers^{ix} and the greater society with other agendas in mind?

Indeed, we might ask, why is the child born in the first place? For what reasons are people today having, or not having children?

French writer Michel Houellebecq in his aptly titled novel "*Atomised*" offers a pessimistic summary why many are opting to remain childless.

He claims: "*Children once existed solely to inherit a man's genes, his moral code and his name. This was taken for granted among the aristocracy, but merchants, craftsmen and peasants also bought into the idea, it became the norm at every level of society.*

That's all gone now... there's nothing for my son to inherit. I have no craft to teach him. I haven't a clue what he might do when he's older. By the time he grows up, the rules I lived by will be meaningless – the world will be completely different.

If a man accepts this... then his life is reduced to nothing more than the sum of his own experience – past and future generations mean nothing to him. That's how we live now. For a man to bring a child into the world now is meaningless.^x

The current trend to adopt offspring, as seen so recently in Hollywood, creates the illusion that anyone can 'acquire' a child, almost as if they are purchased, like assets, to represent success, style and completeness.

The new Spielberg movie *Artificial Intelligence* has as its main protagonist a special purpose robot child (a mecha) who unfortunately has been programmed to love his human mother.

Technologies allow opportunities to determine what, who, and how many children are born. Ethical decisions concerning, for example, the in-vitro fertilisation of a woman with HIV, or the recent efforts to promote human cloning, raise serious issues as to the rights of the child.^{xi}

Are we, in fact, subconsciously re-visiting the ancient view of child as possession? Demands for what a child should do, should achieve and *should be* suggest society is seeking the ultimate 'trophy child', the designer product.

The key to the construction of childhood seems to be in the needs of a particular society.

Hence, Roger Smith^{xii} argues that children today are portrayed as:

- *Consumers* - "passive recipients of ideas, knowledge or product",
- *Interpreters* - "expected...to process and analyse [ideas] in order to demonstrate a capacity for understanding", and as
- *Actors* - where they are "expected to take responsibility, to initiate, and to take a positive role in contributing to the well-being of the community."

They are "expected to be dutiful consumers, creative thinkers, and decisive actors."^{xiii} They are expected to conform, and they are expected to be willing to embrace the academic challenges and social regularities of school life with the belief that they are building bright futures.

In my role as Commissioner for Children and Young People I am constantly faced with situations in which children and young people are not responding to these social demands or do not have the supportive networks and home environments that provide the scaffolding to deal with these expectations.

"For those on the margins, the pressures are acute. Their sense of inadequacy is easily awakened, especially where they are unable to participate fully.

This, in turn, can lead to a loss of belief in other aspects of their own capabilities. The urge to act becomes directed towards distorted goals.

Their only hope of achieving respectability and status is by being recognised and accepted as legitimate and equal members of a consumer society."^{xiv}

Parental pressure is also affecting many students' concepts of self and performance and some of you may well relate to this primary principal's view:

“Parents... want the best equipment, the best classrooms, and of course the very best teachers... Then there is this urgency that their children have special attention.

I can understand up to a point, because most feel their child is special but it's the anxiety I notice, the anxiety that their children must be at the leading edge or the consequences could be disastrous.

There is this drive for the children to not only have the best but be the best, always the best. These parents have high hopes for their children, and high expectations too. I fear for these young people.”^{xv}

Each child reacts differently but research indicates^{xvi} that for many the pressures to perform and expectations for children to interact at an adult-level, or move into adulthood prematurely, exacerbate stress and increase levels of anxiety.

Twenge^{xvii} presents findings that illustrate children of the 80s were already suffering from greater anxiety than a comparable cohort of the 50s.

Those children of the 80s are now the young people of today and seemingly exposed to what has recently been termed, the Quarterlife Crisis^{xviii}.

Young people are often plagued with self-doubt and life transitions that were once accepted as part of growing up are requiring serious attention.

Twenge^{xix} claims that the increased autonomy in the way we live our lives offers greater challenge and excitement but can also lead to increased isolation.

We are confronted with a younger society that has a frighteningly high rate of suicide, eating disorders and depression. A recent national survey identified an overwhelming 520,000 Australian children suffering from mental health problems, of whom one in five have multiple problems.

Of all those surveyed 11.2% were diagnosed with ADHD and 20% indicated suffering from anxiety and depression.^{xx}

In your school environments how do you envisage the role of the child? What silent pedagogies and hidden curricula are subconsciously enforced?

Psychology, sociology, anthropology and education discourses have tended to promote the view of children as “incomplete beings, or ‘becomings’. They are described as society’s future, as learners – recipients of adult input, and objects of adult actions and adult research.”^{xxi}

Performance indicators and outcomes are set to drive students to constantly struggle to reach their *greatest* potential. Collaboration is there but even in teams there is a focus on winning, on being the best.

Children are brought up in a society of what Tim Costello calls ‘competitive individualism’^{xxii} and as a result are expected to meet and surpass what we, as society, as educators and as an older and supposedly ‘wiser’ generation, label benchmarks of success.

Schooling has become the social anchor of a child's life and marks what might be considered a *rite of passage*.

As stated in the National Declaration for Education, "It has fallen largely to schools to induct the new generation into the Australian society's values and norms.

Schools (and teachers) have become almost by default the prime agents to develop a shared system of values, the democratic fabric of the nation, inclusiveness and the value of the individual."^{xxiii}

Yet how do we do this and still acknowledge children as beings in their own right, not merely as the adults of the future? And how do we relate to the child we might no longer recognise?

Perhaps it begins in acknowledging the differences that exist, accepting them and embracing them. Society is changing and inevitably children are too. They are exposed to a new rhythm of living and as a result are being constructed and construct themselves differently.

As Hollywood filmmaker Barry Levinson says, "you cannot put a child in front of a television set where he [or she] is bombarded by images and not ultimately have an adult who is born and bred to see things differently. How can that not alter us?" ^{xxiv}

It is also of interest to note that the fairly recent development of sending text messages via mobile phones was invented by Finnish school boys who were nervous about asking girls out face to face and Finnish school girls who wanted to instantly report to their girlfriends what happened on those dates.^{xxv}

In the early 90's Green and Bigum^{xxvi} presented the notion of the 'alien' in the classroom. 'Alien' to indicate new life form in a world of radically evolving technologies and also to illustrate the increasing differences between generations. The balance of power inside a classroom might in fact lead to the teacher being the alien presence.

The digital medium is fast re-modelling styles of literacy-learning. Parents having time to read aloud to their children has been greatly affected, that is, if children these days are actually exposed to books in the home environment.

Gleick highlights the emergence of the one-minute stories: "*One-Minute Bedtime Stories... One-Minute Birthday Stories, One-Minute Teddy Bear Stories, One-Minute Christmas Stories*",^{xxvii} and adds that children "may not need a stopwatch for the dash from once-upon-a-time to happily-ever-after...[but] perhaps the young targets of this bedtime largesse will grow up to join the ranks of those who consider a full-length book to be a quaint object."^{xxviii}

Dale Spender^{xxix} claims that by school age, children now operate in two worlds – the dependent and passive world of a print-dominated environment, and the fearless, independent and confident world of the digital environment.

The characteristics of the dependent passive world dominated by the print medium require children to: 'sit still and concentrate; use disciplined eye movement; consign information to memory; follow a linear argument (usually someone else's); reduce

meaning; foster a particular and ordered world view; identify cause and effect, and beginning and end'^{xxx}

In contrast, the characteristics acquired by and required for operating in the fearless, independent, and confident world dominated by digital media are:

- 'rapid hand-eye coordination and encompassing eye movement;
- the mental agility to make rapid connections;
- the ability to organise information and deal with the absence of ending; access information rather than memorise it; and,
- to put a 'spin' on information rather than reduce its meaning'^{xxxii}.

The digital environment is not something from which children should, or could, be excluded. While Internet use should always be monitored to avoid exposure to non-child friendly sites, it provides children with opportunities and entertainment never experienced by any previous generation.

It allows immediate access to information that, by contrast, makes that bastion of knowledge of past generations, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, irrelevant and boring and less than a mere drop in the bucket of e-available information.

It provides them with the capacity to socialise electronically with other children, unlimited by constraints of location or time. And, interestingly, the Internet is not, as once anticipated, a subversive force to decentralise knowledge and conflict with traditional hierarchies.

It is now being argued that young people "who grew up with the Internet – are not [all] rebels and free agents. On the contrary, they are incredibly – even disconcertingly – comfortable with authority." And they appear to be more willing to conform than in past generations.^{xxxii}

Moreover, the phenomenal success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter indicates that increased computer interaction does not foreshadow the total demise of children's literature.

'Pottermania'^{xxxiii} has highlighted what children are seeking in a story: they are entertained with compulsive, rich imagery through text that reflects the visual world of digital media with its pace, action, vibrancy and the complexity of ideas.

It does not speak down to the young reader. It engages to the extent that children feel involved, challenged and empowered.

As a social indicator it is important to note that millions of children all over the world identify with Harry – a child orphaned and alone, considered by mainstream 'Muggles', (the name given to the non-magical humans among us), as a delinquent from the wrong side of the tracks, to be feared because he is different.

In the past, protagonists of the White Anglo-Saxon/two-parent/picket fence variety may have been the norm. Now it seems to be Harry, a 'regular kid', (albeit a magical one), from a non-traditional family background, who suffers bullying and is often marginalised.

He finds his escape on the social periphery in a world full of wonder, danger, magic and power. Indeed Harry Potter shows us that make-believe is alive and well! He

also shows us with whom children these days seem to identify and, like Harry, they too, want to take on the world!

As educators and school leaders, do you see the child participating in this way?

How often, as adults, do we see the child through the lens of their family and social circumstances, ignoring their creative energies if they fall outside perceived constructions of what is and is not 'appropriate'?

With school-based management, and the general busyness of the day, how difficult it must be to allow the time to really listen, to hear and understand what children are trying to say.

We make judgements about such things as the music children listen to but are they interpreting the lyrics as we might – from an adult perspective?

We say violence is becoming a greater concern and movies and video games are to blame. Ask the children and they may well tell you they are not seeking violence so much as *action*.

Do school systems alienate the younger generation? As principals, how often do you ask yourselves whether your reactions are based on regulation or through fear of the unknown and change, rather than seeking ways to meet students needs and provide relevant, supportive, challenging and stimulating learning environments?

Nel Noddings^{xxxiv} suspects focussing on a culture of caring may be one way to address this issue. She argues that we need to reconsider the way in which we engage with children at both personal and professional levels.

Andy Hargreaves reiterates this stating that “emotions are at the heart of teaching” and that “teaching is a passionate vocation”^{xxxv}.

While also recognising immense workloads, societal pressures, teacher guilt and burn-out^{xxxvi}, Hargreaves promotes a school environment in which teachers can relate to students and can inspire them through understanding not contrived allegiance.

As educators, and particularly as principals, it is vital to consider the impact of different leadership strategies on students and how democratic philosophies are embraced throughout the school.

Sergiovanni^{xxxvii} speaks of developing *transformative leadership*, where “leaders and followers are united in pursuit of higher-level goals common to both...[Where] both want to become the best. [And where] both want to shape the school in a new direction.”

This involves negotiation and a willingness to understand and establish pedagogies that empower both teachers and students through shared construction of knowledge; appreciation of differences; and an awareness that with inter-personal relationships bias and perspective will always intervene.^{xxxviii}

Accepting change means accepting that children are no longer expected to passively engage with the world around them. Instead they are being encouraged to have a voice. We just need to *want* to hear them.

It is important to continually revisit how we relate to children in a way that is meaningful *to them*, how we find ‘teachable moments’ that lead to effective learning, and how we challenge young minds to critically engage with content knowledge and develop skills to access and comprehend information.

What questions do we ask ourselves and the children, both verbally and non-verbally? And what frames our views of the world?

Smyth^{xxix} proposes a guideline for critical reflection that involves *describing, informing, confronting* and *reconstructing* our interpretations and requires asking ourselves four key questions:

1. What do I do?
2. What does this mean?
3. How did I come to be like this? and,
4. How might I do things differently?

Reflecting like this helps us to make explicit the beliefs about children and childhood that underlie our practice, that lead educators to set up schools in particular ways and interact with children in particular ways rather than others.

Seeking our own personal answers to these questions can be challenging, as we may come to realise that our practices are based on dated or inappropriate beliefs.

But, as professionals, we owe it to ourselves and to the children in our care, to confront these issues.

Childhood as we constructed it is changing but this does not mean as educators we are not needed. Quite the opposite.

Children need, and one would imagine they will continue to need, loving, nurturing support, our professional expertise, our scaffolding of their learning, and our fostering of their curiosity, imagination and wonder at the world.

We might not be in a position to play vigilante but we can enforce a certain degree of moderation in the lifestyles of children. We can lead and model behaviours and expectations of self and others that we believe to be appropriate.

And we can become more aware and critically reflective of the personal and socio-cultural biases that we carry.

We might also endeavour to *trust* rather than over-protect this young generation. Most children do have the facility to “develop forms of cognitive and attitudinal organisation that enable them to interpret the world and perform in it.”^{xl}

They may seem vulnerable and politically unsophisticated, but when presented with a purpose and when given the opportunity – children care.

They believe in life even if they see it through different eyes. Kessler claims that “Young people are crying out to be seen and heard so that they, in turn, can take in the world through learning, loving, and serving.”^{xli}

We are invited here to ‘rediscover the heart and soul of teaching’. Perhaps in doing so we might review “the quality of relationships that nourish the soul of students...whether it is a relationship to one’s own self, to others, or to the world, the experience of deep connection arises when there is a profound respect, a deep caring, and a quality of “being with” that honors the truth of each participant in the relationship.”^{xliii}

As Commissioner for Children and Young People, and throughout the years I have spent as an educator, I believe that we need to value and respect all children.

We need not fear the end of childhood, but *take the time* to allow the young to find their own ways of viewing the world.

So does the child still exist? Yes. In a multitude of ways to a multitude of people. The question for primary principals is not “are these children ready for school?” It is, “Is this school ready for today’s children?”

ⁱ Mayall, 1996: 1, Cited in Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. & Pence, A., (1999), *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives*, London: Falmer Press.

ⁱⁱ Dr Suess (nd) [Online]: http://www.cybernation.com/victory/quotations/subjects/quotes_children.html [Accessed 6 April 2001].

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Gergen, K. (1991). *The saturated self: Dilemmas of contemporary life*. NY: Basic Books.

^{iv} Quoted in Gleick, J. (1999). *Faster: The acceleration of just about everything*. London: Little, Brown and Company, p. 201.

^v O’Malley, B. (2001). Junk food ads dominate kids shows. *The Courier Mail*, 3 August, p.6.

^{vi} Owens, S. (2001). Gluttons for punishment, *The Australian Financial Review*, Weekend 10-11 February.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Higgins, M. (2001). Scientists link chemical exposure to early puberty. *Environmental News Network* (ENN) [Online]: http://www.enn.com/news/enn-stories/2001/02/02152001/earlypuberty_41939.asp [Accessed 26 July 2001].

^{ix} Hill, M. & Tisdale, K. (1997). *Children and society*. Harlow, UK: Addison, Wesley, Longman.

^x Houellebecq, M. 2000, *Atomised*, trans. F. Wynne, Heinemann, London, quoted in Taylor, L. & M. 2001, A question of breeding, *The Australian Financial Review*, Friday 1 June, pp 1-2, 6.

^{xi} Neill, R. (2001). Child’s rights considered last. *The Australian*, 17 August 2001.

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^{xiii} *ibid*, p.8

^{xiv} *ibid*, p.8.

^{xv} Quoted in Rossmann, A. (1997). *When will the children play? Making time for childhood*. Kew, Vic.: Mandarin p.121.

^{xvi} Twenge, J. (2000). The age of anxiety? Birth cohort change in anxiety and neuroticism, 1952-1993. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79 (6), pp.1007-1021.

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^{xxii} Brecher, J. & Costello, T. (1994). *Global village or global pillage: Economic reconstruction from the bottom up*. Boston: South End Press; Quoted (nd). Are we an economy or a society? [Online]: <http://www.loc-gov-focus.net/1998/june/economy.htm>

^{xxiii} Australian College of Education/Australian Council for Educational Administration (2001). *A National Declaration for Education 2001: A report on the findings*. [Online]: <http://www.austcolled.com.au/EdAssembly/Declar01.htm> p.8.

[Accessed 2 August 2001].

^{xxiv} Quoted in Gleick, J. (1999). *Faster: The acceleration of just about everything*. London: Little, Brown and Company, p.176.

^{xxv} Norton, N.Y. (2001). *Next. The future just happened* pp.17-18.

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