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1

INTRODUCTION

I love education. I love working with the young, helping them to discover their abilities, achieve new things, find direction for their future.

But I am worried about teachers. So many have lost their sense of worth, and their sense of purpose. They feel put upon and powerless. They have lost the excitement of teaching. They feel alone in a difficult job.

I understand why. Teachers are confused about the many changes being forced upon them; resentful of the presumption of expertise by people who have no real concept of what happens in a 21st-century classroom; depressed by the unending expectations of politicians and the community; hurt by society's lack of respect for the work which most teachers do with a deep sense of care, commitment and purpose; and frustrated by the many demands of systems, governments and the community that take time and energy and often make no contribution to learning.

I understand, but I am aware that much of this is unlikely to change in the short term. Cycles may pass, particular issues may change, but the feelings will remain, transferring to new issues. Fullan puts it bluntly: 'There is no point in lamenting the fact that the system is unreasonable, and no percentage in waiting around for it to become more reasonable. It won't.'¹

Unless ...

It is the 'unless' which is the purpose of this book. There are many things about schools over which teachers have little control and which are difficult to change—the social and political context, the total physical and staff resources, the particular staff appointed, the parents, the students, the buildings and facilities, and so on. We can influence these, but decision-makers may choose not to listen.

We do, however, have control over our own attitudes—how we choose to respond to these things. Our attitudes affect our actions, and therefore our work. How we look at things, think about them and understand them has a significant impact on how we deal with them.

By changing our attitudes we are able to change the quality of the teaching and learning in the school. We are also able to change our own feelings of worth, and our ability not only to cope with the

pressures, but to influence the agenda ourselves and to forge a path ahead.

Does that sound unreasonable? It shouldn't. You have probably made a similar argument to your students. We tell them if their results and behaviour are below their abilities, and that to improve both is well within their capabilities. We tell them that all they need to do is to change their attitudes, to take a different look at their school and their studies.

Put simply, we don't see the world as it is but as we are. Sharma explains it this way:

One of the greatest freedoms each of us has as people is the freedom to choose how we view our roles in the world and the power we all have to make positive decisions in whatever conditions we happen to find ourselves.²

And further:

In truth, no condition is either bad or good. It just *is*. The way we *perceive* it makes it 'bad' or 'good'. The excellent news is that perception is within our control.³

While circumstances may be difficult to change, our attitudes towards them can be changed. This book, therefore, suggests some attitudes that are relevant to successful teaching in the current and emerging context.

We begin by looking at our attitude to the political and social *context* of schooling, because we need to be aware of the big picture. Too often, we feel that it is just *our* government, *our* system or *our* school which is under pressure—but in reality, the difficulties you face as a teacher are the same as those faced by teachers in all western countries.

Our attitude to *change* will affect the way we cope with current and future changes, because we need to be comfortable with uncertainty, to have a more relaxed approach to doubt. The only thing certain about the future is that the rate of change will not ease. But there are ways we can cope with the change.

This leads us to explore our attitude to our *calling*, because this work is not worth doing unless we have some commitment to it. It is important that we teach because we believe we have a contribution to make to the future through the current generation of youth.

Our attitude to *curriculum* will determine the emphases we bring to our teaching. We need to be innovative and creative, committed to finding better ways to help students learn.

Our students—and their families, and our colleagues—need more than academic learning, so we explore our attitude towards *caring*.

Beyond care, schools need to be places of belonging, so, critical to our life in schools is our attitude towards *community*.

We struggle if we try to do it all alone. We need to tap into the synergy of working with others, so we explore our attitude to *collaboration*.

Change challenges our own skills, so we explore our attitude to dealing with *challenge*, our commitment to our own professional growth, and to supporting the growth of colleagues.

Finally, we acknowledge that we will be unable to give ourselves to others in this demanding work if our own lives are out of balance. So we look at our attitude to *coping*. As we bring it all together, I suggest that we seek for ourselves and our colleagues a sense of worth, a sense of achievement and a sense of community.

WHAT'S YOUR ATTITUDE?

Did you see in the news that a principal has expelled a group of students who were involved in cyberbullying another student?

I did. What a disgusting way to behave.

And yet the principal was not disciplined in any way.

The principal? She did the right thing. The students should have been charged with slander or assault or the like.

Eh? That's not the way I saw it. I thought the principal's actions were over the top.

What? The victim suffered serious trauma and couldn't face going to school.

She obviously needed a bit of counselling. As a teacher, doesn't it worry you what will happen to the students who were expelled? What will this do to their life opportunities?

I believe in consequences as a way of learning to change your behaviour. I am sick of people in our community destroying the lives of others under the guise of a 'bit of fun' or because it's 'normal behaviour'.

Well, I guess it depends on your attitude to these things.

I guess it does. On a lighter note, that reminds me that, yesterday, one of my students, whose attitude is a bit carefree, told me that his Dad said that school is like eating broccoli: Just eat it up, because one day you'll realise it was good for you.

That's like saying that school is like a big nose: You're stuck with it so learn to live with it. Or school is like being in a shipwreck: It was a great experience, but I wouldn't wish it on anyone else.

Not every student feels negative about school. Some might say school is like a massage: It's not about what you learn; it's about making you feel more able to face the world.

I guess our attitude affects how we respond to things, doesn't it?

Sure does. So, how many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?

I don't know. How many?

Just one, but the light bulb must want to change.

2

OUR ATTITUDE TO CONTEXT: BE AWARE OF THE BIG PICTURE

Changes in education are not confined to particular locations nor particular governments. The forces for change and the responses to them have common threads throughout the world.

Unfortunately, although change has been the dominant issue on the education agenda of many countries for the past 30 years, the ideas behind the changes have remained sketchy in the minds of teachers. Handy writes:

If we wish to enjoy more of the opportunities and less of the risks we need to understand the changes better. Those who know why changes come waste less effort in protecting themselves or in fighting the inevitable. Those who realise where changes are heading are better able to use the changes to their own advantage. The society which welcomes change can use that change instead of just reacting to it.⁴

In order to make sense of the variety of changes imposed on schools by governments, teachers need to ensure that they understand the big picture.

Interpret the big picture

The major forces impacting on schools and teachers are not the result of secret agenda created by any one person or group. There are many ideologies, interests and issues constantly driving the economic, political, social and educational agenda. What is more, the agenda are very public. They are debated by politicians and business people, reported by the press, written about in books, joked about by comedians, and expressed in the storylines of movies and television shows.

How do the changes come about? Typically, we find that books by business gurus and futurists set the scene for changing expectations of business and the economy. Social commentators ground these in the local context. Educators translate the ideas into an educational context. Governmental authorities review the ideas with formal reports or position papers, leading to manifestos for the future using ideas adapted, or simply adopted, from others. We can

argue that the initiating authors have themselves influenced the agenda by promoting their opinions with fervour. However, these writers have become highly reputed, and therefore influential, because their assessment of the present, and their directions for the future, strike a chord in readers and listeners.

Education is not quarantined from the political, economic and social agenda. We cannot ignore the fact that schools cost money, taxpayers' money, and lots of it. And schools are getting more expensive. Smaller class sizes, the insatiable costs of computer technology, the higher expectations of building standards, and the push for higher teacher salaries, for example, constantly add to the cost of schooling.

When our personal budgets are under pressure, we begin by looking at the big-ticket items. So do governments. When they need to prune spending, schools loom as a key target for analysis.

Not only is there concern about the vast resources consumed by education, but also about the lack of transparency in how these resources are directed towards educational goals. When countries suffer high levels of unemployment, face economic uncertainty and perceive changes to the community's social fabric and historical values, decision-makers look critically at schools. Are schools equipping youth with the requisite skills for employment? Are they teaching society's values? Are they preparing students for a competitive global economy? While we, in schools, might vigorously question the validity of these goals and the role of schools in meeting them, politicians, employers and the community as a whole will continue to see these questions as fundamental to the effective development of society.

In addition, schools are seen as the major place of education of children in social and moral matters, with the family seeming to play a smaller and smaller role. Therefore, it is seen as the fault of schools when a student leaves school ill-equipped for the workforce or with a lack of interest in employment, when juvenile crime is on the increase, or when youth are perceived to lack 'appropriate' morals or values.

This is illustrated by Beare's summary of Australian educational reform over six decades. He identifies the following periods:

- Post-war reconstruction. In this period the emphasis was on development. Education was a priority, with a redesign and explosion of education. Universal secondary education was introduced, commonwealth funds were directed towards secondary science laboratories and libraries, new teachers' colleges were established, and teaching was a respected career.
- Reconstruction and upgrading of schooling in the 1970s and early 1980s. It had become clear that society's expectations of schools could not be met with the limited state government funding

available, outmoded buildings, and dated curricula and teaching approaches. The Australian Government provided extensive resources to schools, facilitating new curricula, new building design, innovative teaching, new independent schools, new approaches to assessment, decentralised system offices, new approaches to involving parents in schools, and more.

- Economic rationality of the 1980s and 1990s. The rate of spending could not be sustained. New governments in the United States and Great Britain promoted economic rationalism, a reaction to the high-spending expansion of government services, including education. The community wanted evidence that it was getting value for money from government services. More educational decisions were vested in schools, with a contradictory increase in central expectations, especially of principals. This was a period of school-based decision-making, competition between schools and a customer service approach to schooling.
- The technology revolution from the mid 1990s onwards. The influence of the computer challenged teaching and learning methodology, and the very nature and structure of schools and schooling. Expectations of educators changed dramatically, and the new generation of teachers welcomed those changes.
- The one-world, end-time convulsions, into the 21st century. The current period involves a genuine globalisation of schooling and learning. The international movement of goods, services, employment, finance, information and ideas cannot be controlled. National performance data is compared internationally. In addition, there is now a significant shift in the cultural and economic power base away from western nations. All of these things impact significantly on what is taught in schools and how.⁵

You will have experienced some of these periods. You may recall community issues and educational priorities associated with those times. They will have been evident in political speeches and newspaper headlines, as well as changed regulations and other signs of reform.

School reform is aimed at how schools and systems are run. It is a political movement. The policymaking about education has been taken from the grip of educators and placed in the hands of political, community and business leaders who have set the agenda for teachers. These policymakers sometimes omit educators from the process or seek their participation only to refine and implement what governments have already decided.

School reform, unlike the bulk of the policymaking done by any government, is an issue that captures mainstream media attention and makes its way into legislation, party platforms and campaign speeches. Governments are powerful actors in education in all

countries. They are learning from each other, and models of school reform are crossing international boundaries.

Understand the present

Teachers tend to see themselves as victims in this. Some key understandings from the previous discussion may be helpful, however, in helping teachers to change their attitudes by understanding the larger context of change.

Understand that the changes are not confined to your local system or region. The influences come from all over the world and influence education systems throughout the world. The 'big' changes are not confined to our country, our state, our system, our sector or our school. Nor are they owned by particular governments, although their ways of responding may be. Rather, it can be seen as reassuring that many governments are making similar responses to similar issues and that these responses are independent of ideology.

Realise that schooling is one of many areas of change. The changes which impinge upon schools do not begin, nor end, with schools. Their purpose is social reconstruction. Schools are expensive and influential elements of society, shaping the values and skills of the next generation of adults, so they tend to be priority targets of political action. However, to put it in perspective, each trend also impacts on business law, taxation law, community services, government funding arrangements, and so on.

Understand that there is a motivation behind the specific ideas. Try to understand why a particular idea is being promoted. What is it that this change is expected to achieve? What are governments trying to achieve, for example, with 'high stakes' testing and the public display of test data? What is behind increasing autonomy of government schools? What is to be achieved by increasingly meaningful community participation in schools?

If you are uncertain what is behind a particular idea, try looking at the idea from another perspective. Set up a role play in which a politician, business leader, director of education, parent, principal and teacher talk together about a particular change, giving their own perspective on why it is necessary, what it has the potential to achieve, and what the added advantages might be. You may surprise yourself by agreeing with some of the ideas behind the change, if not the way it is being imposed.

Avoid taking the changes personally. While it is sometimes hurtful to hear community leaders disparage teachers and schools, these things are usually said to add pressure on teachers to make the changes desired. The speaker is usually not intending to attack you personally, nor even teachers as a group.

Accept that school leaders also struggle. If your principal or other leaders appear to be responding to the changes in ways which you find unsupportive of teaching and learning, discuss this with them. They are attempting to respond to their own pressures. Explore the 'big picture' with them, and work together on a school-based response.

Anticipate the future

What about the future? What changes are next? Can you learn to read the signs in the political and educational environment? Guthrie and Koppich offer some useful guidelines, including the following indicators, which imply some key questions to consider in order to identify future changes:⁶

- Education reform is a delayed political response to social disequilibrium. What areas of social disequilibrium are being highlighted by politicians? These could include youth crime, disengagement or unemployment.
- Reform occurs during periods when values are confused or unstable. Is there a values disequilibrium? For example, is there a division within the community about traditional values or religious education?
- The reform may coincide with a significant political shift. Is a significant shift taking place in political ideology, decision-making powers, regulatory permissions or prohibitions or the distribution of resources? For example, has there been a change of government, a change of leadership or power groups within government, significant funding initiatives in a particular field, new laws or regulations?
- The reform will have been proposed earlier, but not successfully taken up. What reforms have been proposed earlier, but not well implemented, which could be applied to the problem?
- Reform depends on a policy entrepreneur or champion. Is there, for example, a new government minister or community leader being outspoken on issues for which education reform could be seen as a solution?

If you can observe the socio-political scene and note some of these indicators coming together, you may be able to guess at future directions for the education agenda. Of course, we cannot fully predict what changes the future will bring to education, nor can we predict how insistent those changes will be. What we can do as educators is to realise that schools are not protected reserves where politicians and governments may not tread. Increasingly, we will have a range of people tramping through our garden, directing us to plant here and weed there. The first step in being prepared to cope with this and even to fight it is to know who is coming and with what

agenda. We do this by moving from a defensive stance, from which we complain of persecution, to a proactive stance, from which we seek to be informed about the current and impending changes.

What might be the issues in 2030? Possibilities include:

- **Globalism:** Resources, services, information and ideas will be shared throughout the world. Education will facilitate collaborations between students in diverse locations. Courses and assessments will not be national, but selected from a range of international options.
- **Tribalism and community:** Globalism will have a downside. Many people will feel intimidated and isolated by belonging to the whole world, yet to no particular part of it. They will respond by withdrawing into local groups and seeking face-to-face connection with real people. Education will respond to this by insisting that students spend a specified amount of time each day in contact groups. Depending on age, student 'attendance' will be measured as a combination of physical attendance and online participation. School buildings will be scaled down in size and cost. Many teachers will work partly from home and partly from school buildings. There will be industrial issues about monitoring teachers' hours of work. Emotional intelligence and relational competencies will be assessed regularly by the school.
- **Transparency and privacy:** Personal identity theft, the worldwide publication of confidential information about individuals and organisations, and the demoralising effect of so-called 'transparency' on disadvantaged schools and communities will result in an increased call for confidentiality. Schools will minimise whole-school data sharing. Governments will not support league tables or the publication of school data, although there will be independent sites which display what they claim is accurate data.)

As educators, we cannot emphatically predict the future big issues nor the responses governments will make to them. However, we can watch the sky, hold a wet finger up to the winds of change, and listen to forecasts, which will ensure that we are not taken by surprise by the coming changes.

Future ways of change

Not only will the big issues continue to evolve, but the process of change will also be driven by new approaches. Hargreaves and Shirley identify three ways of implementing change in the past 60 years.⁷ As they describe it, the first way to implement change involves state support and professional freedom and innovation, but also results in inconsistency between schools. The second way to implement change is through market competition and educational standardisation in which professional autonomy is lost. The third way tries to navigate

between and beyond the market and the state and balance professional autonomy with accountability.

Hargreaves and Shirley also suggest a fourth way that we might implement change in the future. This way seeks change through democracy and professionalism. It places trust and confidence in the expertise of highly trained professionals, a fundamental shift in teachers' professionalism that offers schools greater autonomy and introduces more openness to and engagement with parents and communities.

REFLECT

- What are the key changes which have been imposed on schools in the past decade or two? Try to identify the 'big issues' behind them.
- What are the changes which are currently featuring in the rhetoric of politicians and education leaders, in the media, and in education journals? Try to identify the 'big issues' which are driving them.
- What are the 'big issues' you foresee driving education 10 years from now?
- How do you feel about these changes and issues? What impact have they had or might they have on student learning and education? What impact have they had or might they have on your day to day work? What strategies have you used to cope? In what ways will you cope with future changes?

WHAT'S YOUR ATTITUDE?

I'm sick of these changes that keep landing on me. I've heard people say to keep your head down and let them all blow over. How do you cope?

I apply what I call 'The Clay Blob Theory for Coping with Change'.

I haven't heard of that. How does it work?

There are many changes blowing in the educational wind. Some of them are mostly fluff. They are thrown into the air, but are so lightweight that the wind simply blows them away, never to be heard of again. Some changes contain grains of clay. The material scatters over a wide area, leaving little spatters or grains sticking on assorted surfaces. These changes are irritating, rather than impacting. With little effort they can be mopped up or just ignored. But occasionally there comes a change which is a large blob of clay, falling in a sticky mess right in the middle of the classroom or school. It

can't be cleaned away. These are the changes which matter, which are beyond our control.

Well, exactly! What do you do about those things?

Some teachers spend a great deal of energy trying to pretend the blob doesn't exist, covering it up, finding ways to skirt around it, or rationalising its presence as unobtrusive.

You've been watching me, haven't you?

You, and thousands of others, and myself, sometimes! I've learnt that a better approach is to roll up your sleeves, dig your hands into the clay while it is still wet and mould it into a shape you find attractive or useful. If you get into it soon enough and vigorously enough, before it sets, you can remould it to your purposes. You may even get to like it!

You make it sound like fun! But how do I know what to discard and what to mould?

The first step to survival is to understand the big picture. Watch the press, educational journals, politicians and others, and you'll get better at discerning the clay blobs from the pieces of grit and fluff.

I have a new slogan: Be bold—mould!