Best Practice
as it applies to schools

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ABSTRACT

As we approach the new century, there is a need to focus on the role schools play in forming the lives of the students who are entrusted to their care. This paper attempts to focus on the true meaning and the real purpose of education, and through this, examine what ‘best practice’ actually means for schools. It is argued that corporate notions of ‘best practice’ which are increasingly being advocated for schools actually work against the development of the learning outcomes students will need if they are to rise to the challenges of life in the first half of the next century. This is because such views of best practice tend to encourage uniformity through adherence to pre-determined goals, emphasising control, accountability and short-term goals.

For contemporary education to fulfil its purposes of forming young lives, shaping the future direction of society, and nurturing talents and skills, emphasis should be placed on flexible learning outcomes. The concept of authentic best practice is developed in contrast with traditional or corporate best practice, as a means to establish a long-term focus, create a sustainable vision, encourage creativity and open-endedness, and base learning on sound philosophical basis.

In order to achieve these objectives and achieve authentic best practice, schools benefit from being organised as ‘learning organisations’. These can be defined in several ways, but MacNeill and Silcox (1996) note that they facilitate and promote learning at all levels, transform the organisation and the practices of individuals within it, demonstrate organisational and institutional improvement, and are able to adapt to lead change. Therefore, authentic best practice implies:
1. Doing everything at the highest possible standards for the benefit of everyone in the school community;
2. Reflecting long-term aspirations and targets; and
3. Being consistent with functioning as a ‘learning organisation’.

Corporate best practice is generally based on the behaviourist theories which dominated educational thinking until the 1960s. These view learning as a stimulus-response process, in which desired behaviours are reinforced, usually through extrinsic motivation, by specifying target behaviours (‘there is one right answer’), often emphasising drill and practice and low-order thinking skills. Corporate best practice reflects behaviourism by emphasising short-term goals to modify behaviour through rewards and punishments such as performance appraisals.

In contrast with behaviourist learning theories, most educators have now moved closer to the position held in constructivist learning theories, which view learners as active organisms in the environment, drawing together disparate pieces of information to make sense of things. By adopting techniques of critical thinking and logic, new knowledge is constructed. Motivation is intrinsic. Learning environments are complex, non-linear and open-ended. Education which authentically prepares young people for life after schooling will therefore develop reasoning, critical and creative thinking skills, problem solving, retention and use of understandings, cognitive transfer of concepts and metacognitive reflection on experience. A classroom which reflects authentic best practice will thus be student-centred, collaborative, problem-solving focused and emphasising process rather than product. This stands in stark contrast with the narrow, short-term, pre-determined, simplistic, inflexible goal setting that often characterises corporate notions of performance appraisal.

Thus, it is argued that effective learning and authentic best practice will be best promoted through five strategies:
1. A clearly articulated and agreed vision and values position which is translated effectively into practice
2. Committed and caring staff
3. An explicit focus on long-term thinking
4. Recognition of individual differences among students
5. Working together in a school to form an effective ‘learning organisation’

To address the challenges of unpredictable change and to form an authentic learning organisation, schools need a new way of thinking. However, change is usually a difficult process for the people involved. Unfortunately, it is often impossible to make worthwhile progress without someone being hurt or feeling devalued. Change will therefore bring complaints. People must be cared for, but equally the long-term goals must be achieved; achieving this important balance calls for masterful sensitivity and consideration.

However, even this framework leaves open the wider potential dilemma of corporate notions of ‘best practice’ being applied inappropriately to schools. Corporate notions of ‘Best Practice’ with their emphasis on control, accountability and pre-set objectives may sound very tidy in theory, but they are not necessarily appropriate in a context where young lives are being shaped in an educational environment of collaboration and open-endedness. The framework offered here is an attempt to provide a means to implement ‘authentic best practice’ in an educational ‘learning organisation’ environment.
On 9th November 1989, just over a decade ago, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. East Germans shouted ‘We are the People’ as they strode through Potsdamer Platz into West Berlin for the first time. Unforgettable images filled the world’s television screens, and a cacophony of honking car horns echoed down Berlin’s streets. At the time, enthusiastic Germans described it as a ‘horn concerto’, but it wasn’t a particularly musical celebration.

It was the sound of Trabants, hundreds of them. What is a Trabant? If ever I write a thesaurus, I shall define a Trabant as the opposite of ‘best practice’. The Trabant was an East German car which was a symbol of all that was wrong with the East German economy. With 500cc two-stroke engines that produced massive amounts of blue smoke that smelt like a badly-tuned lawn mower and a body made from plastic that sadly will never rust away, the Trabant was the most common car on East Germany’s roads before 1989. It could just manage a speed of 100 kilometres per hour with a tail-wind.

When the Berlin Wall fell, the production line at Zwickau was nearing its three millionth car, but it never made it. Just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, a new Trabant cost the equivalent of 10 months average salary. With the fall of the Wall, the factory could not even give away Trabants, and there were even small ads in newspapers from owners offering to swap their Trabant for a packet of cigarettes.

Originally intended to be a rainproof motorcycle with a boot, the Trabant was born in 1957. Thirty years later, while the Russians had moved on to space stations, and the West Germans were building BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes, the Trabant still came in only two colours, beige or light blue, it still had its fuel tank mounted on top of the engine and it still had a dipstick instead of a fuel gauge. In spite of that, if you wanted to own a Trabant in your 30s, you had to place an order as soon as you turned 18. After 13 to 15 years, depending on demand, you would receive a letter announcing your Trabant was ready, unless you wanted an option such as a radio or pin-stripes, in which case there was a six-month delay. Alternatively, you could travel to the factory at Zwickau,
meet the factory executive at the appropriate time, slip him an envelope with banknotes, and collect the car the next day.

In fact a common joke in East Germany went like this. A phone call came from the Trabant factory with the good news that the car that had been ordered could be collected at the factory in just over 14 years, on the 8th August to be precise. ‘Is that in the morning or the afternoon’ the customer would ask. ‘How would I know; what difference does it make?’ would come the gruff reply from the factory. ‘It’s just that I have arranged for a plumber to come in the afternoon on that day...’ came the reply.

With its body made from pressed resin reinforced by waste cotton, driving a Trabant was like driving a heavily starched shirt. Unfortunately for its drivers, it had a major safety disadvantage - on impact it would disintegrate. Reversing was to be avoided unless you enjoyed sitting in a cloud of your own emissions. Today, an eleven-year old Trabant does pass the German exhaust tests, but only by virtue of it being considered a vintage car. And it lends itself to jokes such as -- Why does a Trabant have safety belts?; so you can use the car as a rucksack when it breaks down. Another story told in East Germany was this: A Trabant encounters a cow pat on an East German road. Says the cow pat – ‘what are you’? ‘I’m a car’, says the Trabant, ‘what are you’? ‘I’m a pizza’ says the cow pat.

Why am I telling an audience of educators in Australia about an icon of Communist East Germany? As I said, the Trabant can be regarded as the antithesis of ‘best practice’. Moreover, I would suggest that like many ‘expert’ consultants and proponents of ‘best practice’, the Trabant was loud, there were too many of them and it seems they will never go away. The ‘best practice’ experts are expensive, like Trabants, and similarly there are long queues of people waiting for them in spite of the expense. I suspect that like Trabants, many ‘best practice experts’ have never lived up to their promises, and they could even be considered dangerous, although unfortunately not because they disintegrate like Trabants. Perhaps the most pleasant parallel between Trabants and ‘best practice experts’ is that both lend themselves to satire.

The term ‘best practice’ is becoming more and more widely used in educational circles, especially as concepts and practices from business become more widely accepted in schools. Indeed, just last week, multiple copies of brochures entitled ‘Best Practice in Reporting on Student and School Achievement’ arrived on my desk, sourced from the Commonwealth Government. The brochures looked at research on the things parents wanted from school reports, and used this as a basis to identify ‘best practice’ for schools to report to parents on student and school achievement.

In preparing this paper, I tried (in vain) to find a commonly accepted definition or understanding of ‘best practice’. As is my
common convention, I began my search on the internet. When I began preparing this paper in late 1999, I entered the term “best practice” in AltaVista, and it brought no fewer than 106,309 ‘hits’, almost none of which actually defined what was meant by the term. This week I checked again, the number of ‘hits’ had risen to 175,744.

One site was uploaded by an organisation calling itself the Centre for Best Practice1. It defined ‘best practice’ in these words: ‘Best Practice is about identifying the best ways of managing the firm and producing and delivering its services, while continually improving what the firm does. Underlying all this is the idea that the firm must become close to and properly understand its clients, develop the systems and procedures to give its clients exactly what they want, and work with all the people in the firm to achieve these things, particularly the firm’s programs of continuous improvement.

This organisation, which was established by The Law Society of New South Wales ‘to develop and administer a Standard, specifically designed for law firms, which will assist those firms to prepare simple but effective practice plans so that they can operate more efficiently and effectively’, promised that implementation of ‘best practice’ would result in:

• increased client satisfaction
• enhanced professionalism
• minimisation of risk
• greater work satisfaction
• and practice improvement and enhanced profitability.

Another site described procedures, or strategy, used to implement ‘best practice’. According to this site2, to implement ‘best practice’, one must:

1. Assemble a best practice team from management, operating units, and staff groups to develop the business strategy.
2. Develop a mission statement that describes what the company does and which markets it serves.
3. Articulate a vision that makes sense in terms of external factors (suppliers, customers, competitors, and business environment); internal factors (core competencies and existing business portfolio); and company values.
4. Translate the mission and vision into a detailed business strategy by defining strategic objectives, supporting tactics, best practices and associated milestones.
5. Modify organizational structure, competencies, and control systems to facilitate implementation of strategy.
6. Monitor progress toward the firm’s overarching strategic goals.
7. Modify the business strategy as needed to achieve the company’s long-term objectives using best practice experience.

Being aware of the ‘push’ in business and other circles to jump on a ‘best practice’ bandwagon, educators might legitimately ask what

1 http://www.collaw.edu.au/cbp%20front.htm
2 http://members.tripod.com/infbprpros/bestpractice2.html
the concept has to offer in the field of education. Such a question goes to the very heart of the purpose of education and the role schools play in the process of forming young people.

There is not universal agreement on the true purpose of education. Partington (1999) groups the commonly expressed purposes of education by identifying five clusters of educational theories according to their respective priorities:

- **Transcendental education** – what is thought to be of greatest value to God's purposes;
- **Instrumental education** – what is thought to be of greatest value to society broadly as it is;
- **Liberal education** – what is thought to be of greatest value to the development of the mind;
- **Reconstructionist education** – what is thought to be of greatest value in transforming society, from how it is, to one of radically different character; and
- **Child-centred education** – what is thought to be of greatest value or interest to the child.

Of course, these groups of theories are not mutually exclusive. A close relationship is possible between aspects of reconstructionist and transcendental education, to take just one example, and these may in turn have considerable overlap with both child-centred and liberal education.

Notwithstanding their differences, all five groups of theories would claim to be preparing students for the future. If they are to fulfil their roles authentically, therefore, we can say that schools and educators must take the role of preparing students for the future seriously, and ask themselves whether they are simply reacting to the pressures of contemporary (or past) society, or whether they are seeking to shape the society of the future for the better. In order to shape society for the better, schools must enshrine a purpose for humanity and put this into place authentically through their educational practices.

The central role of education contrasts with the overall objectives of most corporate enterprises, which are more financially and commercially driven. Quite simply, there is a great chasm between the fundamental purposes of profit-driven commercial enterprises and the proper concerns of educational leadership true to its cause, which is to form young lives in a way that shapes society for the better. That needs to be acknowledged if schools are to move forward and benefit the world’s children as they have such potential to do.

In my own school, I often quote the words that ‘the heart of education is the education of the heart’. Schools are places vitally concerned with the formation of young lives; in a literal sense schools hold within them the future direction of society. Schools (generally) exist not to produce profits but to shape society’s future by nurturing the talents and skills of the children entrusted into their care and to do so in a safe, loving and caring environment.
Businesses focus on short-term planning which reflects the duration of balance sheets, whereas the focus for schools should be a generation or two ahead.

Short-term thinking is particularly dominant in Western societies such as our own, and it contrasts with Asian societies which have longer-term views. I remember a media interview with Deng Xiaoping in the mid-1980s, shortly after agreement had been reached with the British to return Hong Kong to China in 1997. A Western reporter asked Deng Xiaoping whether he felt the ‘Hong Kong solution’ might also have applicability to Taiwan. Deng replied that he saw it as inevitable that Taiwan would return to China. When asked when this would happen, Deng replied ‘Oh, not too far into the future; certainly in the next four to five hundred years’.

In an educational context, where the formation of young people must prepare them for continuing change over several decades, a model of short-term goal setting is actually dangerous. The idea is not new; about 2500 years ago the Chinese philosopher Confucius commented learning without thinking is futile; thinking without learning is dangerous (learning without thinking is futile; thinking without learning is dangerous (learning without thinking is futile; thinking without learning is dangerous). We can therefore distinguish between ‘corporate best practice’ which focuses on control, accountability and achievement of short-term goals, with what I refer to as ‘authentic best practice’ which has a long-term focus of creating an inspiring sustainable vision based on a sound philosophy. The rest of this paper develops this concept of ‘authentic best practice’ and looks at its outworkings.

At a conference held at Prince Alfred College in July 1998, the Australian futurist Richard Slaughter described this difference as moving forward from driving with dipped headlights to drawing a road map. He describes a ‘40-30-20 rule’ based on research which shows that about 40% of senior executive time is spent ‘looking outwards’; of this time only 30% is spent looking at least two to three years into the future, and of this only 20% of time is spent building a collective view of the future. When we multiply 40% times 30% times 20%, we find that only 2.8% of senior executives’ time is spent working towards long-term futures, largely because they are overwhelmed by workload, accountability requirements, correspondence, putting out ‘brush fires’, coping with board demands, and so on. If this is the consequence of ‘Best Practice’ and it is the best that ‘business models’ can offer, then I suggest that schools deserve better!

Happily, there is a trend for businesses to move away from narrow control-based practices to become performance-focused ‘learning organisations’ which encourage creativity, the healthy contention of competing ideas and a longer-term focus. Tone interpretation of the difference between control-based organisations and performance focused organisations is illustrated in the table at the top of the next page.
Because of their educative function, schools are well placed to become *learning organisations*, probably more so than any other type of organisation. Various definitions exist for the ‘learning organisation’, but for the purpose of this discussion I suggest that a learning organisation:

- facilitates and promotes learning at all levels;
- transforms the organisation and an individual’s practices;
- demonstrates organisational and individual improvement;
- is able to adapt and lead change. (MacNeill & Silcox, 1996)

If we examine almost any aspect of our lives, we see evidence of huge structural changes which have transformed our ways of doing things during the twentieth century. Farming, mining, transport and manufacturing are now almost unrecognisable compared with a century ago (with the obvious exception of Trabant production lines!). Although classrooms appear superficially

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**Table:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control-focused organisations</th>
<th>Performance-focused organisations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Organisation pyramids value control above all else. Organisations are inward looking. Predictability is valued.</td>
<td>• Focus is on the customer and organisations are outward looking. Improvements are always being sought. Responsiveness is valued.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Whole departments are created for control purposes.</td>
<td>• There is reduced or eliminated dependence on inspection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• To lose control is to lose everything.</td>
<td>• To give control is to get control.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• As long as we are in control who cares what else is happening?</td>
<td>• Focus is on service and contribution to the whole.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• External controls are emphasised.</td>
<td>• Self control is emphasised</td>
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<tr>
<td>• There are rules (which are inflexible).</td>
<td>• There are guidelines (which allow flexibility).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 'No surprises' leads to the illusion of control.</td>
<td>• Positive surprise is essential to high performance. All learning is preceded by ignorance, followed by surprise. It is positive surprise that develops energy and motivation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• People avoid individual responsibility.</td>
<td>• People act as if it is their organisation. They don't blame the boss, system or product.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Performance assessment is from above.</td>
<td>• It is appreciated that in reality we know it is not possible to plan and predict accurately. The individual seeks assessment from customers and participants in the process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We feel our survival is in the hands of others.</td>
<td>• Our survival is in our hands.</td>
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Adapted from Napoli, quoted in MacNeill and Silcox (1996) p.30
different, with smaller classes, better lighting, advanced technology, and so on, the learning approaches in many classrooms sadly show little change, with teacher-controlled environments still dominating learning styles.

In contrast to the vitality implicit in the concept of the ‘learning organisation’, learning in schools has been characterised by behaviourist and cognitive processing approaches for most of the 20th century. Behaviourism, which dominated educational thinking until the early 1970s, took the view that learning results from forming associations between behaviours and their consequences. Behaviourists argued that responses are shaped by reinforcing desired behaviours, and this is done most effectively through extrinsic motivators (rewards and punishments). According to behaviourists, learning occurs best when target behaviours are specified (‘there is only one right answer’). Thus, behaviourism was consistent with the notion of the assembly line, and behaviourist learning often emphasised drill and practice exercises which developed ‘inert’ knowledge.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, cognitive processing tended to emerge as the dominant learning model, or at least a serious rival of behaviourism. The cognitive processing model was based on the Piagetian notion that learning occurs as the individual interacts with the environment. Cognitive processing emphasises discovery learning, through which the knowledge that is ‘out there’ is found, assimilated and accommodated.

Corporate approaches to ‘Best Practice’, which seek specific outcomes based on short-term goals, are based on behaviourist learning theories. Behaviourism, or modifying people’s responses through rewards and punishments, tends to dominate corporate concepts of ‘best practice’. When performance appraisal is used for remuneration reviews, a quite narrow behaviourist approach is being explicitly adopted. However, both the behaviourist and cognitive processing models fell into general disfavour during the 1990s, as they were seen to reflect an outdated ‘industrial revolution’ approach to learning. Contemporary educationists favour a more balanced approach, advocating a repertoire of learning styles which especially include ‘constructivist learning theories’.

Constructivists view the learner as an active being within the environment, not just responding to stimuli, but engaging, grappling and seeking to make sense of things. Knowledge is generated internally using external data, rather than being simply absorbed from an external source, and motivation is intrinsic. By adopting principles of critical thinking and logic, learners make tentative interpretations of experience and then go on to elaborate and test those interpretations, constructing new knowledge.
Learners form knowledge by linking new information to already known information and understandings. Therefore, when confronted with something that does not seem consistent with these earlier understandings, a temporary disharmony must be accepted until it is resolved by forming new connections and linkages. Learning environments are thus complex, non-linear and open-ended. Where this approach extends and builds upon an established knowledge base, then a balanced model of educational formation is achieved.

Thus, learning which includes a constructivist dimension aims to develop reasoning, critical and creative thinking skills, problem solving, retention and use of understandings, cognitive transfer of concepts, and metacognitive reflection of experience, all through open-ended learning experiences. The emphasis is on non-linear processes rather than a pre-determined product, though significant value should of course still be placed on the outcomes of the process.

It follows from this that if schools are to lead the way as effective learning organisations with a focus on the future, they need to develop a creative, educationally-based model of leadership, rather than blindly copy (behaviourist) management structures from the corporate world. It is suggested here that there are five factors needed to ensure ‘authentic best practice’ in schools if they are to develop as effective learning organisations with a long-term focus and an emphasis on balanced learning which includes a constructivist dimension. These five factors, which will be explored individually, are:

4. A clearly articulated and agreed vision and values position which is translated effectively into practice
5. Committed and caring staff
6. An explicit focus on long-term thinking
7. Recognition of individual differences among students
8. Working together in a school to form an effective ‘learning organisation’.

1. Clearly articulated and agreed vision and values position which is translated effectively into practice

A school which aims for nothing will surely achieve just that! If there is no agreed vision and values position, then either the school community will be racked with dissent and debate, or it will simply stagnate through paralysis. In his book Leading Minds: Anatomy of Leadership, Howard Gardner writes:

Most human beings crave an explicit statement of values - a perspective on what counts as being true, beautiful, and good. Traditionally these views have come from art or religion; more recently they have come as well from philosophy, science and newly constructed secular groups. Personal introspection and discussion are additional sources of value systems. At
times of stability, the accepted norms may be adhered to without
discussion. But particularly in times of crisis or cataclysmic change,
individuals crave a larger explanatory framework.  (p.55)

From the 1960s to the 1980s, a perceived dichotomy
between ‘facts’ and ‘values’ found its way into the
classrooms of many countries. The result was the
rise of a so-called ‘values-free’ education, where no
value judgements were supposed to intrude into
teaching. Of course, it is now understood that
‘values-free’ education itself imposes a values position - specifically
the position that value-free facts are intrinsically more valuable
than something with an ethical or moral dimension. A so-called
‘values-free’ education is arguably a most inadequate and fragile
foundation for building any society which is to function morally
and ethically.

By necessity, any vision and values position must be
translated into practice. The means of implementation
will vary from school to school, from country to
country and from culture to culture. It is important,
however, that an active planning process is
undertaken so that the vision is articulated clearly and
is supported by a consensus of the teachers and staff
whose job it is to implement it.

This can probably be summed up with one basic
principle:  

**If you stand in the middle of the road, you can be hit from
both directions**

A school should be clear about its philosophy and state it
unambiguously. If a school tries to be ‘all things to all people’, it
will satisfy no-one and the educational outcomes will be mediocre
at best.

2. Committed and caring staff

Although it seems like a trite truism, a school’s
teaching staff is by far its most important asset. More
than buildings or facilities, it is the teachers who define
the identity and character of a school. For most
parents and students, the staff are the ‘face’ of the
school, and a quality education will result only from
the fruits of their labours. It is the staff who must
implement the long-term vision. Schools which have
the flexibility to select their staff are therefore in a
much stronger position to implement the vision of
shaping future society for the better than schools
without this flexibility.

However, it is important to ensure everyone in the
school is equipped to do their job. This means that it is
not appropriate to concentrate on one section of a school exclusively while allowing another to suffer. It also means that staff, as the school’s most important asset, must be developed professionally to ensure future competence and creativity.

In order to develop staff professionally, consultants from corporate backgrounds often advocate programmes of appraisal. Referring specifically to an educational context, Wildy and Wallace advocate five principles of accountability relationships and appraisal:

- professional accountability focuses on improving performance
- accountability relationships work meaningfully only in a climate of trust
- there are no recipes, only principles and consequences
- professional accountability means demonstrating acceptance of responsibilities
- seeking, giving and receiving feedback are central to professional accountability.

At its worst, appraisal can degenerate into blinkered, deterministic, behaviourist manipulation towards short-term goals. On the other hand, when used creatively, appraisal can focus the attention of teachers and others on the vision and values position of the school, encouraging them and assisting greatly in achieving the vision. Certainly, it seems appropriate that appraisal processes should be flexible and not onerous. Notwithstanding this, appraisal is a contentious issue in many countries where it has been introduced into schools. Many teachers find it threatening, arguing that ‘it is hard to stand up and look around when there’s a sword hanging over your head’.

On the other hand, appraisal and accountability are generally accepted practices in most corporate enterprises and among most professions. If appraisal is to be effective, it must be introduced gently and with sensitivity, with staff being led gently and interactively to recognise the positive benefits it can bring to their own effectiveness. On the other hand, if staff see appraisal as a threat, or if it operates without trust, it is unlikely to achieve its objectives of enhancing the achievement of the school’s aims or bringing staff ‘on-board’ with the long-term vision and direction of the school.

Sometimes, appraisal in schools is seen is something that must be positive to the point of artificiality. Appraisal becomes a waste of people’s precious time if it is less than honest, although loving honesty is certainly preferable to brutal honesty! If appraisal is to have a formative role, then it must not degenerate to platitudes and cliches. Mistakes should be welcomes as a learning experience rather than being denied and being a point of embarrassment for reasons of ego or fear.

Similarly, blind blame has no place in an authentic learning organisation. Mistakes should be seen as a positive thing, as long as people learn from them. In my early teaching days, I remember
talking with an elderly Headmaster who worked in India and who always claimed that he was happiest when his school was operating on the edge of chaos. He argued that if the school was so finely-tuned and controlled that mistakes could not be made then real learning could not take place and people would never grow in their learning. Risks are necessary to accomplish anything meaningful.

There are perhaps three key principles to bear in mind with staff appraisal:

**It's hard to stand up and look around when there's a sword hanging over your head**

If staff see appraisal as a threat, or if it operates without trust, it is unlikely to achieve its objectives of enhancing the achievement of the school's aims or bringing staff 'on board' with the long-term vision and direction of the school.

**If you never make a mistake, you'll never make anything.**

Blind blame has no place in an authentic learning organisation. Mistakes should be seen as a positive thing, as long as people learn from them. I remember an elderly Headmaster who worked in India who always claimed that he was happiest when his school was operating on the edge of chaos. He argued that if the school was so finely-tuned and controlled that mistakes could not be made then real learning could not take place and people would never grow in their learning. Risks are necessary to accomplish anything meaningful.

**Don't distort, just report**

Some years ago, I attended an international conference of Heads of International Baccalaureate schools in Argentina. In one of the sessions, the Vice-Chancellors of Argentina's universities were asked to describe the skills they thought schools should concentrate more on developing. Several of the Vice-Chancellors gave lengthy reports and comprehensive lists, but one Vice-Chancellor simply stood up and said one sentence: "We need students who can discern the difference between truth and consensus". If schools can achieve that, not only in their appraisal processes but throughout the culture of their school communities, then they will be well on the way to becoming true learning organisations.

3. An explicit focus on long-term thinking

There is a well-known Maori saying in New Zealand – “you walk into the future looking backwards”. Even better known are the words of George Santayana who wrote “those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it” (The Life of Reason, 1906). Each of these sayings emphasises the need to examine the past, not as an end in itself, but as a means to a very practical end. If students’ future needs are to...
be met, and future society is to be shaped for the better, a long-term view is required which extends both into the past and into the future.

Unfortunately, the pace of change often seems to exceed the pace of understanding. Ever since Alvin Toffler wrote Future Shock in 1970, we have recognised that the pace of change is accelerating. Realistically, it is practically impossible for any single school administrator to keep up with every piece of relevant new research or administrative change which is directed by higher authorities. The appropriate response to rapid change and information overload is to maintain a clear and unambiguous focus on the long-term vision, to acquire and nurture good staff, and to delegate effectively in order that the long-term vision will be achieved.

If you want to be tied to the past, marry a museum curator
Just because something was true years ago does not necessarily mean it is still appropriate. Looking to the past for lessons has its place, but the real focus ought to be the future, building on the past.

The pace of change always exceeds the pace of understanding
Changes are taking place rapidly. Realistically it is impossible to keep up with all of them. The way to cope with change is to have a good staff and to keep them.

It is said that ‘hype springs eternal’. Care is needed before embarking on any programme of change in education, as the lives of students are too important to be subjected to ill-considered change for its own sake. At least in many Western countries, school principals frequently receive mailings from consultants offering input and advice on new techniques which may or may not be adequately researched, or which may be inapplicable to a school environment. Such input is usually offered for very high fees. Even strategies which are highly appropriate for a profit-making company could well be disastrous for a school. Programmes should be implemented only after a robust analysis, not after hearing the latest hype. Change should always be evaluated in the context of a school’s vision and purpose.

4. Recognition of individual differences among students
In 1983, the American Professor Howard Gardner formulated the now famous model of multiple intelligences. Gardner took contemporary research on the brain, including Roger Sperry’s Left Brain/Right Brain research, Paul MacLean’s Triune Brain research,
and Karl Pribram’s Hologram Brain model, and identified eight ‘ways of knowing’:
- Verbal/Linguistic intelligence
- Logical/Mathematical intelligence
- Visual/Spatial intelligence
- Body/Kinaesthetic intelligence
- Musical/Rhythmic intelligence
- Interpersonal intelligence
- Intrapersonal intelligence
- Existential intelligence.

So many things fail to interest us, simply because they don’t find in us enough surfaces on which to live, and what we have to do is to increase the number of planes in our mind, so that a much larger number of themes can find a plane in it at the same time.

- Ortega y Gasset

Not only is the human brain aware of its own existence, but through it the universe has begun to know itself... The degree to which we progress depends upon the degree to which we make use of this incredible product of nature - the degree to which we use our intelligence and our consciousness to the full.

- Peter Russell, in ‘The Global Brain’

The essence of Gardner’s model is that different people learn through different means, and individual people vary their learning style from time to time. There are significant implications in this research which explain why some students perform better with some teachers than others, why some students perform better in some subjects than others, and why it is necessary to identify each individual student’s area of giftedness and allow full scope for its development. Gardner’s multiple intelligences implies that individual and small group learning should play a significant part in each student’s education, that a variety of forms of input be used with every class in every subject, and that opportunities be provided for meta-cognitive reflection with students, even those of a very young age who are discovering their preferred learning styles.

Gardner’s multiple intelligences have gained wide acceptance, and have been translated into classroom programmes by educators such as David Lazear. Furthermore, they have provided a foundation for even more ambitious frameworks of learning such as Robert Marzano’s ‘Dimensions of Learning’. Marzano reviewed some thirty years of educational research into learning processes and translated this into a framework of classroom teaching based on five types, or ‘dimensions’, of thinking which can apply to students of any age:
- Positive attitudes and perceptions about learning
- Thinking involved in acquiring and integrating knowledge
- Thinking involved in extending and refining knowledge
- Thinking involved in using knowledge meaningfully
- Productive habits of mind

It is not the place of this paper to delve deeply into contemporary brain research and learning theory. Suffice to say that the evidence seems to demand that education have a strong constructivist focus which highlights critical and creative thinking skills, that teaching staff be flexible and aware of individual differences among students, and that students be taught how to reflect upon and act according to their own individual learning and thinking styles.
In order to make an omelette, it is necessary to break a few eggs.
- Mao Zedong

Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and perceiving something different.
- Albert Szent-Gyorgi, double Nobel laureate

In their book Executive EQ, Cooper and Sawaf describe the difference between Type-1 and Type-2 business situations. Type-1 situations represent the preferred model (or comfort zone) of most senior decision makers, whereas the reality is that Type-2 situations are becoming the norm given today’s accelerating social, political and technological change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type-1 situations</th>
<th>Type-2 situations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple or analysable</td>
<td>Complex, unanalysable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions foreseeable</td>
<td>Solutions unforecastable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions predictable</td>
<td>Solutions unpredictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities are obvious</td>
<td>Opportunities are hidden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchanging conditions</td>
<td>Changing conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmable</td>
<td>Unprogrammable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘A’ leads to ‘B’</td>
<td>‘A’ may or may not lead to ‘B’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May occur routinely</td>
<td>Never routine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar to ‘XYZ’</td>
<td>Unique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be planned for in advance</td>
<td>Cannot be planned for in advance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It must be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than the creation of a new [system]. For the initiator has the enmity of all who will profit by the preservation of the old institutions and merely lukewarm defenders in those who would gain by the new one.
- Machiavelli, ‘The Prince’

To address the growing frequency of type-2 situations and to form an authentic learning organisation, schools need a new way of thinking. However, change is usually a difficult process for the people involved, and as Robert Sternberg of Yale University pointed out, “Creative people ALWAYS encounter obstacles, and almost inevitably encounter resistance”.

Rowing the boat will cause it to rock
Unfortunately, it is often impossible to make worthwhile progress without someone being hurt or feeling devalued. Change will therefore bring complaints. People must be cared for, but equally the long-term goals must be achieved; achieving this important balance calls for masterful sensitivity and consideration.

Drawing it all together
The world we have made as a result of the level of thinking we have done thus far, creates problems we cannot solve with the same level of thinking at which we created them.
- Albert Einstein
Effective Programs for Successful Schools’ in which she identified five principles for action in schools:

- Ensure front-line workers (principals and teachers) understand the problem
- Design jobs so that all future workers have both incentives and opportunities to contribute to society
- Provide all front-line workers with the training needed to pursue solutions effectively
- Measure progress on a regular basis
- Keep learning; there are no magic bullets

At my own school (Prince Alfred College), the task will shortly begin of developing a new strategic plan to provide a long-term framework for planning. A key priority of the Plan will be to develop long-term goals which would allow the school to develop as a true learning organisation. I recently completed a similar task at my previous school (Kristin School in Auckland, New Zealand) which had a similar priority, and the framework of this Strategic Plan may provide one practical example of an approach whereby schools might implement the complex task of forming a learning organisation based on ‘authentic best practice’. Building on ideas espoused in Louise Stoll’s 1997 paper on Successful Schools, eight key strategies were identified that would help to achieve this goal:

1. Focus constantly on teaching, learning and ‘authentic best practice’;
2. Promote a culture of high expectations together with a belief that an education based on moral, ethical and religious values makes a difference;
3. Offer every student as full a range of opportunities in as many fields as possible;
4. Develop an international perspective and a sense of global awareness as an integral part of the school culture;
5. Provide extensive autonomy to the management while maintaining accountability;
6. Ensure flexibility and a highly-developed capacity to manage change at all levels;
7. Prepare consciously for the future through encouraging controlled and targeted innovation;
8. Target steady and sufficient funding to meet established needs.

The overall target outcome was then identified for each student while at the same time trying to allow for individual differences – the profile of the ideal ‘graduate at graduation’. After a long period...
of consultation, an exhaustive list was condensed to assert that by the time they leave school, every student (regardless of individual differences) is:

- highly literate
- highly numerate
- highly ethical
- well-informed
- capable of learning constantly
- confident and able to play their part as a citizen in national society with a global perspective

and that every student must have the opportunity to become:

- highly competent in several fields
- highly creative and innovative
- capable of leadership.

Finally, these goals were deliberately constrained by the proclaiming that no new programme or service would be implemented unless:

- it contributes to the stated vision
- it is consistent with the school’s moral, ethical and religious values
- it is accompanied by staff professional development
- it is accompanied by a plan to assess its effectiveness
- there are sufficient resources to ensure effective implementation

A framework such as this provides one appropriate approach whereby schools can direct themselves towards the task of shaping future society for the better. Naturally, each school would have to undertake the task itself of relating this broad framework to its own specific vision, resource structure, political situation, priorities and aspirations.

However, this still leaves us with the wider potential dilemma of corporate notions of ‘best practice’ being applied inappropriately to schools. I began this address by referring to the fall of Communism in East Germany. Corporate notions of ‘Best Practice’ with their emphasis on control, accountability and pre-set objectives are a little like communism – both sound perfect in theory but the rhetoric of each is a long way from the truth.

Trabant production in East Germany conformed to all the principles of ‘best practice’ as perceived by the business sector, such as it was. It is suggested here that ‘corporate best practice’ here in Australia is equally inappropriate for schools if we take the challenge seriously to become genuine ‘learning organisations’.

Children’s futures deserve better than corporate models of ‘best practice’ seem capable of delivering – we need nothing short of
'authentic best practice' which emphasises open-endedness, creativity, problem-solving, moral and ethical values, critical thinking and constructivist learning. To quote another New Zealand Maori saying, "The bird that eats only the fruits of the forest - theirs will be the forest. The bird that eats the fruits of education - theirs will be the world".

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