



ENDNOTE

ROSA STORELLI

Rosa Storelli was Principal and CEO of Methodist Ladies' College in Kew, Victoria from 1997 to 2012. She spoke with *Independence* Editor, Lyndal Wilson, about her experience of school leadership.

PHOTOGRAPH 'Still climbing mountains': Rosa Storelli and her son, Ben, pictured against one of the mountain ranges dominating the landscape of British Columbia, Canada, where they lived for 18 months to explore different approaches to learning.

PATH TO LEADERSHIP Unlike some educators, who seem to fall into leadership, I made a conscious decision in my early twenties that I wanted to be a Principal by the time I was 40. I saw early on that the beliefs and actions of the Principal determine the school's learning environment and therefore the opportunity to optimise student potential. I wanted to have that capacity to influence the culture of a school, that capacity to make a difference to students, and so I strategically set about learning the things I needed to know to become the sort of educator I wanted to be.

Many people have a dream, an ambition or a goal, but they're too scared to articulate it in case they fail to achieve it; so they hold back to themselves and go about their life with a secret inner ambition. Not me. For me, the process of articulation helps the process of actualisation, and so I told significant people that I wanted to be a Principal and I consciously chose the schools to go to that I believed were going to give me leadership opportunities.

I was 27 when I was appointed to my first significant leadership position – as Head of Middle School at Wesley College's Glen Waverley campus in Melbourne. The Principal at that time was David Prest. 'You are very young to have this appointment,' he told me. 'Just don't let me down!' I was there eight years.

I then moved to Methodist Ladies' College in Melbourne as Head of their Middle School. The position sounded the same, but the role was more complex and provided for me far more autonomy. I was also developing a specific interest in girls' education. I had worked in schools that had transitioned to co-education from boys only and I had devoted a lot of energy to ensuring the girls had equal opportunity in the co-ed environment, but I had never worked in a girls' school.

Four years after joining MLC I was appointed MLC's first female

Principal. I was also pregnant. So, as it happened, the achievement of my two greatest desires – Principalship and parenthood – coincided.

It was an incredibly brave move on the School's part – a forward thinking move. It is now more common to see Principals with young children, but not 15 to 20 years ago. On my appointment as Principal, the School gave me professional development leave; I commenced in the role when my son was six weeks old.

LEADERSHIP INFLUENCES Being the daughter of migrant parents, brought up in a small regional port of South Australia famous for being home to the world's largest lead smelter, has been an enormous influence on my leadership. My passion for education as a door to opportunity and my passion for inclusivity can be traced to my background.

One of the underlying tenets of my Principalship was that everyone in our school community – students, staff, parents, grandparents – should be treated with absolute respect and humility. I wanted every person who came in through the school gate to feel they had the right to belong; I wanted the community to recognise that we benefited from diversity, not elitism. That belief influenced my style of leadership and the curriculum and programs we would implement. For example, MLC was the first independent school to join the Safe Schools Coalition; that was 15 years ago, yet some schools today are still struggling to form policies and practice around same sex attracted or gender diverse students and staff.

I have been privileged to meet many amazing people, both within the education sector and outside, all of whom have influenced me in some way, consciously or not. I learned enormously from the people I served with on the Council of the University of Melbourne. I was Deputy Chancellor for four years, and while that was a big responsibility to take on together with

the Principalship, I regarded it as a form of professional learning.

I also learned from the many capable people who served on MLC's Board. One Chair gave me some very wise advice early on that helped me to evolve as a Principal. She said to me, 'Rosa, when you come to Board meetings or indeed if you bring members of staff to Board meetings, we expect you to be bold in your conversations, otherwise why would we have you there?' Her encouragement to me to speak boldly and courageously about what I believed in allowed me to extend that permission to staff, who in turn role modelled that for our students. The Chair who wants to cut the Principal off at the knees, who is not willing to encourage robust conversations but wants passivity or compliance, is in effect shutting down the whole school community.

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP I had an initial vision of the kind of Principal I wanted to be but, of course, as I was exposed to more leadership opportunities I learned the importance of flexibility. Leadership is multi-dimensional and we need to be agile enough to apply different types of leadership in different situations. Sometimes you need to be the directive leader and at other times the transformational or the collaborative leader.

Leadership is not the property or the privilege of a few: it belongs to everyone. Everyone can be a leader, and they will demonstrate it in different ways. So leadership comes back to each person's values, beliefs and ethics. And self-belief is crucial.

When I started as Principal at MLC, I would walk around the school at 8.30am (waiting for my nanny to arrive), with my little boy in his pram, knowing that half the school community would look at me and say isn't that terrific, we love the role modeling she's doing, and the other half would be thinking, what's she doing, she should be in her office behind her desk. There comes a point when you have to decide to do it

your way. I always had a little mantra running in my head – 'the courage to do leadership differently' – and that courage can manifest in the way you dress and speak and act.

One of the greatest challenges for aspiring Principals is that they think of the big traditional independent schools as the model to aspire to. But we're a very diverse community, a diverse country, we have diverse types of students and we need very diverse schools with diverse forms of leadership. Conforming to one model of leadership is the antithesis to what I believe in; we need school leaders who are authentic spirits.

HIGHLIGHTS Leading the evolution of a school into a diverse learning community, whereby lots of different people could come together and be valued for what they all brought to that community, is a source of deep satisfaction. It underpinned everything we achieved at MLC, from being one of the first schools to establish an early learning centre, which took babies from six weeks of age, to creating immersive learning environments and to the provision of experiential education in multiple settings. I loved the sense of pride people had in being associated with the School, the sense of belonging. So it isn't a particular building or program, but the whole culture that came together and the joy that abounded in it that I look back on with enormous pride.

ADVICE TO NEW OR ASPIRING HEADS

Australian author Robert Dossaix wrote that you can't have a vision for education unless you have a vision for life. I like that. When you think about what type of educator you want to be, what type of Principal you want to be, you actually need to think about what kind of life you want – for yourself and your school community.

Work-life balance is difficult to achieve, but it is something you must never stop striving for. Having family time is important; being fully alive is important.

ENDNOTE

If we only live a one-dimensional school life then we're not very good for our school community. One of my ambitions as a Principal was to model that total capacity for living a full life to my community, and so I regularly told stories about myself as mother, wife, partner, friend and daughter. That can be very powerful, because it says to people that you are leading from the totality of who you are; you're not just putting on your Principal's outfit and holding back on the rest. For the same reason, I didn't want the teachers to be at School all day and all night working. I'd tell them to go home: Go to your sports club! Go to your jazz club! Do other things! Because that enriches our community. You must be brave: you can't allow your work life to prevent you from living your life. It is hard, but you need to strive for this.

A bold leader has to have the courage to remove the road blockers, whether they are people or programs. Sometimes leaders are scared to remove road blockers and are tempted to just go around them. If the roadblock is not in the interests of your students' learning, then it must be removed so that new ways of thinking and doing can be encouraged.

As Principal, don't just focus on the conversations that you can hear; you must also focus on the conversations you don't hear. You need to have the flexibility in your headspace to ask yourself, What are the things that aren't getting said in this meeting? What is the conversation that isn't happening here?

Remember that leadership is not about you: it is about empowering and supporting a team to be the best they can be and celebrating their successes. Walk alongside staff, don't walk in front of them, but have the courage to give them the key to open new doors.

As school leader what you do sets the tone. The most important things you do are the things others don't see: how you conduct yourself when people can't see you is therefore more important than how you conduct yourself publicly.

Be aware of the emotional landscape of your school. The physical design of schools is important because it has an impact on the emotional landscape of the people who enter the space, and that in turn has a big effect on learning outcomes.

BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR HEADS NOW

Australia is changing rapidly, and the issues that emerge from a diverse country – which might include different cultural or economic expectations – come back into our schools. Principals have to manage that social complexity.

A second challenge is managing a stereotypical view of what a Principal is. There are still communities that assess how a Principal is performing depending on whether the Principal is at the school gate saying good morning to every student as they come in. Schools have changed as society has changed, and the complexity of the role of Principal may be at odds with the expectations of communities who have their own view of what a Principal should be doing.

Principals now need the skills to be both a manager of human capital and – even more importantly – a grower of human capital. They must manage the philosophy and values of their school community and hold true to them to avoid being pulled apart by other people's demands.

MOVING ON My Principalship ended in an unexpected and controversial manner. I worked consciously and intentionally to recover from that, to get to the point where I could ask myself, once again, what sort of life I wanted and to begin to reimagine that life.

Challenging and exciting learning opportunities as well as opportunities to make a contribution have come my way and I've relished having the time to explore them. For example, I am an Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University. I was awarded a scholarship to study education in all its forms in Israel as the National Australia Bank/Pratt Foundation Yachad Scholar in 2013

and, recently, while living in Vancouver to support my son's educational journey, I had the opportunity to study teacher education training at the University of British Columbia.

I continue to be an educational advisor for a start-up company in financial literacy, which has entailed delivering a presentation to 300 educators in Los Angeles and presenting at an MBA course at UCLA. And I've been really thrilled with the number of people who have approached me to be their professional mentor. I mentor Principals or CEOs, and senior staff in schools who may be transitioning to Deputy Head roles or wanting to position themselves for leadership roles in other schools. I have found such mentoring to be a privilege – the privilege is in the sharing, the trust, the respect and inevitably the learning!

Leadership is a journey that never ends. The joy of it lies in being part of something bigger than yourself, and having the opportunity to influence something bigger than just you. ■

Rosa Storelli was appointed Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Education, La Trobe University, Victoria in 2013. She is a member of the Advisory Board of Opportunity International Australia and sits on the Advisory Board of Cashtivity. She was a member of the University of Melbourne Council from 2001 to 2010, including its Deputy Chancellor in 2007-10, and served on numerous University committees. She served on the Executive of AHISA's Victorian Branch in 2000-04 and was a member of AHISA's Board from 2001 to 2007. Rosa may be contacted via her website, rosastorelli.com.au.