

## **Student voice as the strategy for schooling transformation**

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### **Abstract:**

Using case study materials and student and teacher polling, the showcase will look at the power within student voice to make a difference in the schooling transformation process. The conversation will explore how adult anxieties can be confronted through non-hierarchical culture and structures and how younger and older members of the school community can work together to develop a school where change is part of the culture. The significant role of leadership and leadership modeling will be discussed and illustrated in the showcase. This will involve reviewing models of leadership and how leadership can be redesigned to develop student voice as a strategy for transformation. An illustration of young leaders from some twenty schools engaging the Vice Chairman of Australia's National Curriculum Board in conversation about what young people see as relevant to a themselves in a National Curriculum will also be presented as part of the discussion on the power, authority and authenticity of student voice.

### **Introduction**

I will argue that transparent and enduring schooling transformation cannot occur without the participation and collaboration of students as the critical client. While there are other stakeholders, particularly school staff and parents, they do not have the critical role of being the client who is to benefit from the schooling experience. These others do have important roles in the transformation process, but not the critical role. They are of different generations and cannot speak for Generations Y and Z. The latter are the 'immediate' generation, growing up with the immediacy of communication and access to information on a global scale. IT, mobile communication and the Internet are their 'life-blood'. They press the buttons without fear of mistakes or losing something!

There is a tendency in schools to think student voice in the context of negotiation about curriculum and curriculum activities. This places both younger people and older people (teachers) in a foreign environment. The teacher is accustomed to managing the classroom and students are accustomed to being managed, so this level of negotiation often is strained. It cannot occur effectively without a school culture of student voice and collaboration. In the context of the latter there is no issue with the more experienced having the major say and role in curriculum decision making and indeed, in the teaching-learning processes.

For the moment let us look at this generation. They are the generation of the global knowledge economy. Mark McKrindle, Australian social researcher, argues that like all generations Generation Y needs time to mature, but in all other respects they are completely unlike any other generation. They are the immediate generation that has grown up or are growing up with the Internet, mobile communication, multi-media and attitude. It is not about their growing into these or having to take them up, these are part of their

culture, their everyday life. They come to school with these cultural experiences as part of them. Their skills and attitudes are enormous. They can apply these to their learning, but we tend not to let them. After all they are in our environment and our environment increasingly does not address their needs or wants. Instead it tries to engage them in an industrial curriculum and the industrial school. These are the young people who start school as learners, teachers, communicators, but we then try to re-teach them these skills and re-develop these attributes as we know them or as we believe they should be.

In setting strategic directions, the Board of ELTHAM College, established two significant directions for schooling transformation. *It set the student as the primary client* of the College and set the College's critical goal as:

*Redefining schooling in collaboration with the client.*

The workshops that set these directions involved the Board, College Executive and student leaders as equals reviewing progress and setting the directions. The College is a public company and the Board is governed by all the legislative and regulatory requirements of the Companies Act, so to trust in this level of interaction and decision with young people is an enormous step forward.

Young people do not want ownership of 'our schools'. To have this would have them rejecting their world, indeed the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, unless we are going to genuinely respect young people and their world and acknowledge the legitimacy of their voice, we will not have schooling transformation. This does not mean that student voice is always right anymore than the voice of any Principal is always right. The right to have it listened to in a collaborative culture, however, is central to transformation.

Young people want ownership of 'their schools'. As part of this, they want schools to be organised around them not around adult convenience. For how long has the notion of primary and secondary been archaic? For how long have we known that thirteen and eighteen year olds don't belong in the same schooling environment? For how long are we going to believe such archaic notions that older students give leadership to the younger students as if it is part of their rite of passage? These are traditional notions that at best provide some 'Churchillian' leadership experiences to a very small part of a generation that doesn't need it. We do know, indeed in our Conferences, we acknowledge that the world has changed, but we want a controlled transformation for our schools that in fact won't work. It hasn't in the past and I see no signs that this is changing.

At best today we have an acknowledgement that young people should be listened to and that consultation about various aspects of schooling curriculum, learning processes and school activities should occur. This is not authentic. It is still about 'our school' and making effort, commendable, to involve students, indeed engage them in what we continue to decide is the life of the school-a school that still has a look and feel from fifty years ago.

There needs to be a culture in which authentic collaboration in decision making can occur. Authentic collaboration cannot happen without young people feeling that their school is open to their dialogue and participation. They need to feel free to be engaged in their school or not. Many feel disengaged, but genuine student voice doesn't allow this to happen by accident. They must choose to disengage.

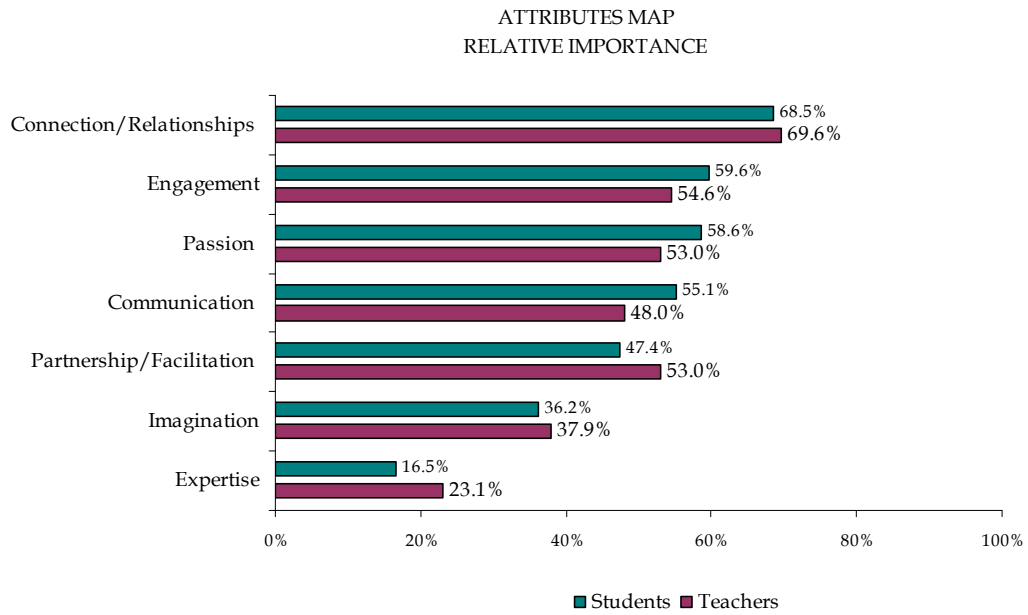
We had a recent Workshop on Community Behaviour in school following an extensive external process of student, parent and staff surveys that indicated that there were areas of behaviour that needed to be addressed. About 45 staff and students were invited to

participate and set recommendations for the school in 2009. There was an external participant and people knew that their recommendations would be implemented provided they were consistent with the College's strategic directions and values. A teacher participant expressed the view that there should have been wider student representation, particularly from those who presented the most community problems through anti-social behaviours. One of the students, perhaps closest to the group to which this other person was referring said: "They were invited, but chose not to come. This was their Student Voice. Perhaps we might create the conditions where next time they will accept the invitation." We need to accept a culture that says it is alright to disengage. This is certainly common to the societies in which we live.

Student voice is about the culture of the school. It is about how people listen and hear and whether as a single voice or a group voice you believe that you can make a difference. Of course, the adults in schools have to be part of this. It is very difficult to have student voice if school staff do not own their own jobs and feel able to make a difference. Staff will be scared of student voice if they have not been given the freedom, indeed the skill, to manage their own work. If staff doesn't have this they will be out of step with the adult role models that young people get through interacting with their global society and the Internet. This is not the problem of staff but that of leadership or lack of it. Education is one of the few, if indeed not the only industry where employees have not been empowered to make a difference as creative and collaborative individuals. Again, however, staff voice is not about a consensus view of the past but being required to manage themselves and their work. Staff voice will only have a role if school leadership gives job ownership to staff and they too can model a 21<sup>st</sup> century labour market.

At ELTHAM we engaged both older (teachers) and younger (students) people in a process to define effective teaching behaviours. The figures below show independently, the relative importance of the key attributes that three groups of younger and older people had put together and judged ELTHAM's performance against these attributes. The student groups were at Year 4, Year 8 and Year 12 levels and the teachers were those most involved with those groups. Participants were asked to determine the relative importance of the key attributes as well as Eltham's performance against these attributes. The output can be seen below.





Figure

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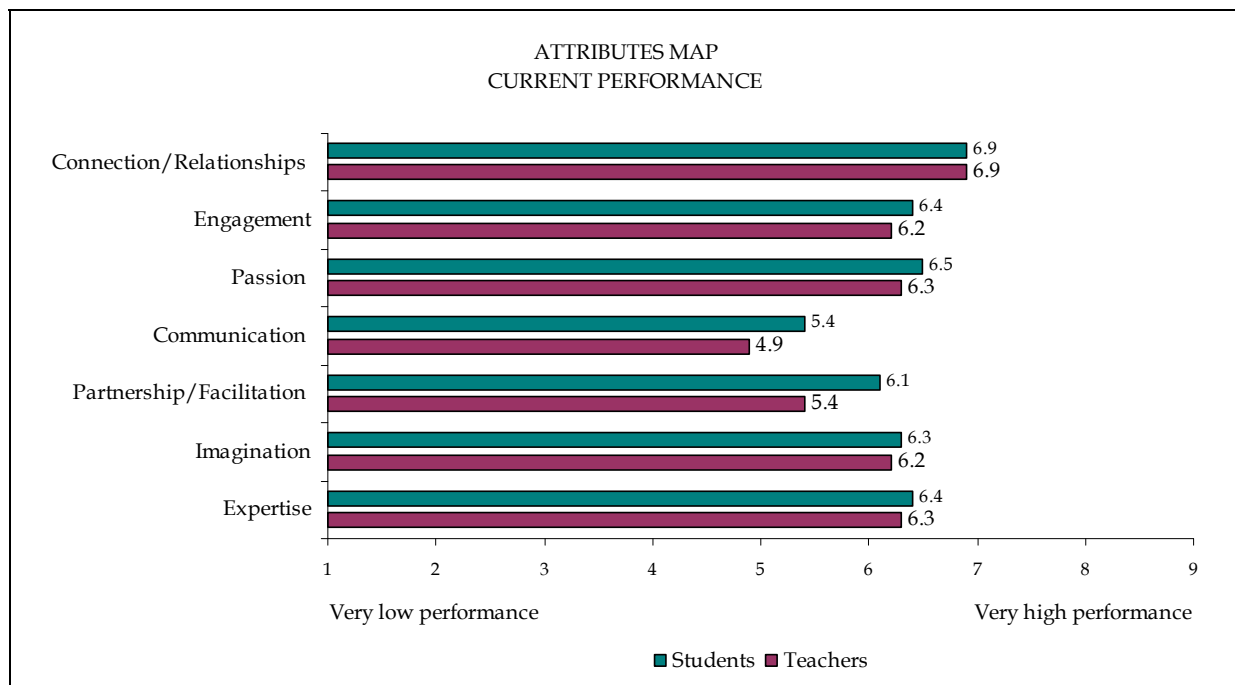


Figure 5

This was a very powerful process for both younger and older people and led to a number of workshops that affirmed teachers and allowed for greater clarification. The clarification included:

CATEGORY	INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES (TABLE HEADING STYLE)
<b>ENGAGEMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers establish a common goal/purpose with our class</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers work with students to plan and implement relevant tasks and challenging activities</li> </ul>
<b>PASSION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers are always learning about young people, their teaching area and learning itself.</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers leave an impact</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers never stop supporting students to be the best that they can be</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers love what they do</li> </ul>
<b>CONNECTION AND RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers build trust by being friendly, genuine and honest</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers follow through and are consistent with their actions</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers celebrate student achievement</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers genuinely care by knowing circumstances and addressing needs of individual students</li> </ul>
<b>IMAGINATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers see their subject matter as being open ended</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers are able to respond in the moment to make meaning</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers use varied and appropriate resources and methodologies to meet and cater for the needs of the students</li> </ul>
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers actively listen by responding to needs of learners</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers communicate in ways we understand</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers provide constructive and specific feedback on students work and performance.</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers communicate openly and honestly</li> </ul>

<b>EXPERTISE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers make relevant connections between subject material and students.</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers can answer questions about the subject and/or work with students to find the answer.</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers structure learning that is appropriate for the age, development and capabilities of the students</li> </ul>
<b>PARTNERSHIP/ FACILITATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers work with students to set short term goals and pose exploratory/open ended questions</li> <li>▪ Eltham Teachers allow for different outcomes through negotiation linked to students needs</li> </ul>

We were able to identify through this process of student-staff collaboration the attributes of effective teaching at ELTHAM. Relationships were at the core of effective teaching-learning. Participants talked about genuine relationships where there was collaboration and working together. Again I would argue that this is at the heart of student voice and where student voice makes a difference to schooling transformation. It also is where staff voice can be heard and make a difference. It too can become authentic as it is within a culture of younger and older people working together and sharing authority. Edna Apek (2001) in discussing young people in the information age, talked about role reversal and the need for older people to share authority with younger people. The latter have so much more access to information and freedom of the mind than any other generation.

Apek's view is important. Sharing authority is about the culture of the whole school and cannot only work in some parts of the schooling process. Negotiating learning experiences in class without a collaborative, working together school culture, does not equate to sharing authority. Shared authority is not about giving away adult responsibility for duty of care, workplace health and safety and curriculum process and outcomes to students. It is about getting rid of relationship hierarchy. ELTHAM students have no problems with my role as Principal/CEO, but they would have problems if I believed my role differentiated us as people. As people we can share our ideas, arrive at agreed decisions, agree to disagree and work collaboratively. We can recognize expectations and consequences and we can accept that these apply to all members of our community. It is very much about mutual acknowledgement.

Each year our senior leaders conduct a student only inter-school conference for some twenty schools and up to eighty participants. This year they focused on the new Government's promise of an education revolution and a proposed National Curriculum agenda. They invited the Deputy Chair of the National Curriculum Committee, Tony McKay, to participate. Voting technology was used to gather specific responses from students and understand the general consensus on these issues.

What resulted was a very spirited and intelligent debate, with numerous questions being posed particularly from Tony Mackay, while answers were gathered from the only people in the world that are in a position to know them: young people who have just gone through the education system.

These are some of the conclusions.

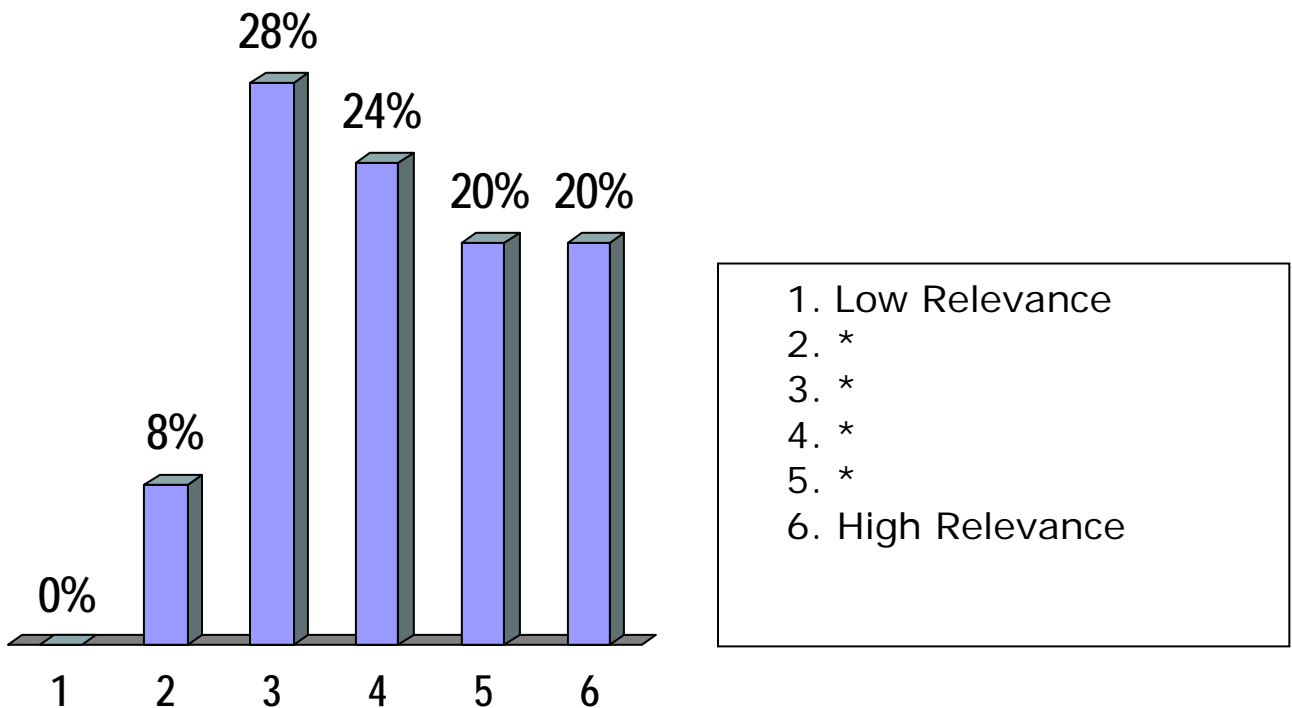
***2.1 If a national Curriculum was put in place what do you think should be included and left out?***

*All students were unanimous in their beliefs that the curriculum should encompass more than English, Maths, Science and History, as has been suggested by the National Curriculum board.*

The conclusion was that all students across Australia should have access to a broad range of studies varying from the arts to information technology, from academic to vocational. The students raised the need for subjects based around social responsibility, those that would deal with Australia's growing health crisis and the need for all students to be made aware of how to lead healthy and happy lives. Emotional and social intelligences and maturity were seen as significant. As well as the concern displayed by students for the current health status of Australia, students believed that to be truly able to become global citizens and compete in a rapidly shrinking world, all students must have the choice to study languages and current world issues.

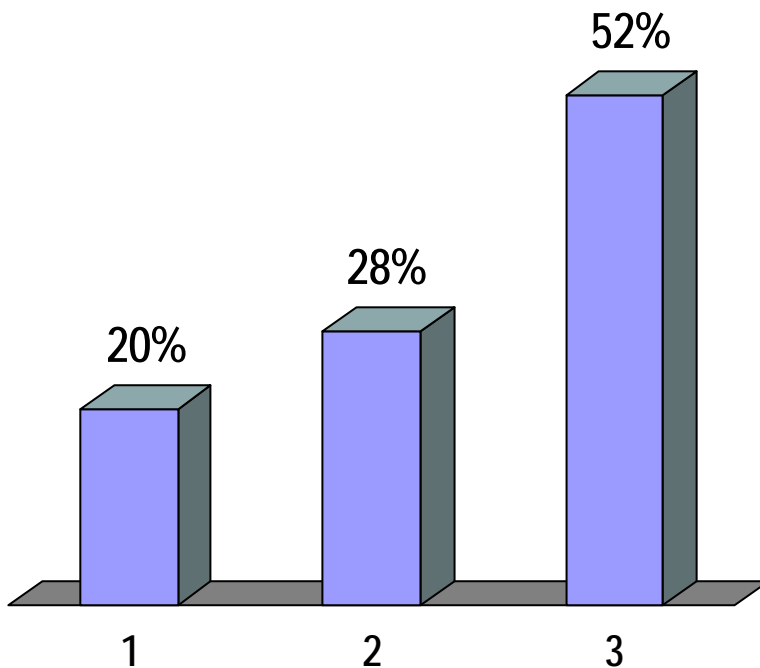
These are some of the big picture issues within schooling where young people have much to say and clearly deserve an equal role. It is not about what they are going to do in class as much as whether what their subjects are that is important to them.

**How much real world significance do the subjects you are currently studying have?**



Students mainly studying maths and science subjects struggled to see the applications of the topics that they had covered, it was commented that subjects such as International Studies and Legal Studies captivated students with their continued links to current events of the world in the media and the accessibility of information and video. They thought that dropout rates would decrease if subjects have increased relevance and captivated interest of students. Students were unsure of the level that practical application could justify the level of theory and knowledge.

## Will teachers be able to deal with this increase in the use of technology?



**1=Yes, 2=No, 3=Unsure**

*Students thought that without training teachers would not be able to handle the increase in the use of technology. One of the comments was that teachers struggle to operate DVD players, how will they go at podcasting lessons. Students also expressed concern at their own ability to operate the technology, that although they have grown up in a technology age they still need education to learn how to use computers successfully. They felt that the new generation of teachers in the whole would be able to deal with this increase easily and seamlessly.*

*Students felt that if a National Curriculum were to be introduced it must be relevant, innovative and superior to current system and allow for growth in the ever-changing 21<sup>st</sup> Century and beyond, also that the Rudd Government should research their education revolution and ask the people who want to be heard, the students about what they really need at their school.*

They concluded with:

*We hope that this report provides some help into the views of students about the National Curriculum and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Education Revolution and see the importance of student voice in the future and the importance of young people's opinions today.*

The previous section gives some perspective by young people across all types of schools (40% Public and 30% each Catholic and Independent) on core curriculum issues that confront a 21<sup>st</sup> century education system. Tony McKay indicated a need to consult with young people not just Principal and teacher groups. As the young people said this is about them and their world. They want to work with us to define schooling for this 21<sup>st</sup> century world, but they do not believe that we have the answers without them.

We need to take this strategic picture and apply it with greater practicality and action within our schools. We need to recognize that all the way through my discussion and illustrations I have been directing attention to authenticity not tokenism. Authenticity is not about how genuine we are in working with young people, but whether we are acknowledging their world from outside school and incorporating it into the culture of school.

Central to transformation of this nature is leadership. While young people are empowered in their lives and have enormous freedoms through their mobile communication technologies, this empowerment needs to be part of their schooling. When it doesn't there is a huge mismatch between their outside school lives and their within school lives. Increasingly the latter will become irrelevant. This irrelevance is growing for both young men and women and supported by Australian and UK research (Slade 2001; ..... It means that the leadership of young people will play only a small role in schooling transformation if the culture of the school, indeed schooling system, does not acknowledge that they are empowered people and need greater ownership of their schools. Recent British reports suggest that 50% of adults do not trust or feel safe with young people, describing many as feral. This is a sad reflection on an adult society that has not grown with the knowledge economy and the young people who have actually grown up with it.

The leadership that is needed is at the Head and senior staff level. Senior leadership can talk about Student Voice, encourage more negotiation in the classroom, support Student Councils and so on, but unless they actually put it into practice through their own leadership, transformation will be marginal and tokenistic. Perhaps most Heads are ageing 'baby boomers' and unable or reluctant to tackle the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps the level of anxiety around sharing authority is too high. It indeed can be scary!

However, it is at this level that change is needed and without schooling transformation won't occur. While schools and Heads may be given greater autonomy and authority through school-based management, if they fail to use it then it will be wasted and will continue to lead to the demoralization of schools and particularly of young people who will become increasingly disengaged.

This leadership requires courage and risk-taking. The day-to-day administrative things need to be delegated or dismissed. Schools can be enormously busy places and if leaders want to lead they cannot allow the detail of the day to day operation of a school dominate their thinking and leadership. Leaders need to make the decision between transformational change or incremental change developing further what we now have. Sadly, the history of schooling is incremental change that becomes so integrated into existing schooling that from year to year schools still look and feel much the same. Most of us in this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are about incremental change not transformational. Educational bureaucracies do not help. They set up quite inappropriate hurdles such as test results and school report cards, appraisal systems and school inspectorial audits that control what change Governments want not the sort of change that young people, their society and our economy needs.

School leaders can be quite powerful, but they need to collaborate in terms of transformation. They often don't in sufficient numbers to have educational bureaucracies

and governments back down. Until they do, we won't have authentic transformation. We will continue to have incremental change that will leave us somewhere in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century-the industrial era. However, if we can have school 'older' leaders collaborating with school 'younger' leaders we might just have that chance to really transform. Try setting up expectations amongst your student leaders that you want the school to be transformed into a vibrant, relevant and engaging social-educational environment for young people and you might find that you cannot turn back. They will expect you to lead by modeling and both young people and staff will come with you, certainly at different stages of enthusiasm, but nonetheless, they will start to engage with the transformation. The Head's role is to set, with varying other people, the strategic directions, vision and values that are within the 21<sup>st</sup> century and which are about young people and then work with these young leaders and other stakeholders, teachers and parents, to make transformation a reality.

How can we do it? In a recent on-line paper I said:

*...I strongly advocate schooling transformation that has leadership that will give legitimacy to student voice at the centre of the school culture. This can be seen through:*

- *Collaboration policies and practices. At ELTHAM we have a policy from Student Council that says any policy that affects students must involve consultation with it. This is accepted. Our Board engages student leadership in business planning.*
- *Freedom to make a difference. Our policy is simple: If it is within our strategic directions, consistent with our values and we can afford it, then do it. It applies to individuals and teams, staff and students.*
- *We apply our values and policies to everyone. OH&S does place a different responsibility on the adult. However, this is accepted as normal.*
- *Open doors: doors are not closed. We don't use gatekeepers, although appointments at times apply. Further, all meetings are open unless personnel are being discussed.*
- *Young people are part of all Committees. That they chose not to attend sometimes is their decision and no reason not to have students as equal members.*
- *Negotiate expectations*
- *Acknowledge and involve all groups in the school not just those appointed to or elected to leadership positions. As with politics, those elected rarely represent a good cross section of the population.*
- *Change the language. Young people are first and foremost people not students or pupils; 'girls and boys' puts them down. Get rid of the term "Rules", they rarely apply in society. We have expectations, guidelines, laws and they apply to everyone not just young people. Classrooms have expectations on all members.*
- *Engage teachers and other school staff, with young people and at a level where they can make a difference. My view is that consensus only applies where it is appropriate. Setting strategic directions is not about consensus but leadership. How they are implemented can be at a consensus level with those people who should be working together.*

Student voice is indeed very powerful, but it needs to be heard. It is not simply the voice within the school because it often will still be dictated by the traditional culture of schooling. It is the voice of young people within their world that needs to be heard and we need Heads who in listening will use this information to: 1. Establish strategic directions and vision, and; 2. Lead a school cultural transformation that will embrace the world in which young people live. To do this requires active leadership that has the courage to take strategic and bold risks.