

NSWSPC CHICKEN SOUP 4

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NSWSPC Chicken Soup records some of the many wonderful anecdotes and stories that we all hold from our many years as Principals and teachers. If you have a special little anecdote, short story or even a longer story about times past, please take the time to share it with us. Simply email it to principalfutures@nswspc.org.au ☺

A (mostly) true story – Chris Bonnor

From my years as a principal of a boys' school I do remember a young lad called Adrian (not his real name) who certainly presented more than his share of challenges. One day at about 9.30am Adrian wandered away from school and off to the town centre where he stumbled into one of those bridging courses for early school leavers. I guess he thought he qualified – after all 9.30 am is quite early. The course that day was about birth control ... to be specific it was covering bananas with things that Adrian first thought were balloons. To cut a long story short he pocketed about 300 of them and came back to school. It all came to light when a teacher noticed that Adrian was enlightening some of his mates about the finer points of family planning. Adrian and his bag of artefacts were then brought to my attention while I was talking to some senior students. The challenge I faced was to keep a straight and serious face in front of the students while the teacher recounted the developing saga. In a more secluded space we contemplated what we should do, a process not helped by the recurring suggestion that we pin holes in all the 'balloons' and give them back to Adrian. While there would have been a time delay (around a dozen years) it might have done wonders for future enrolments. But no, wiser heads – along with concern about the local gene pool – prevailed. As required, parents were contacted. They helped provide some answers: they didn't know he was planning to slip away from school...and no, he hadn't told them of any big plans for the weekend.

Ah, black humour. We needed it then and I guess principals still need it today. I did gain additional mileage out of the incident. I told the story to the principal at our nearby sister school – and for some time after threatened to bring Adrian and his plastic bag over to her school and unclip him at the gate.

Strange men on site (1) – Terry O'Brien

It was lunchtime. A small group of Year 7 girls rushed into my office. "Come quick Miss! There's a strange man in the hall and he's building a house of desks!" So we rushed to the hall and sure enough an elderly man had created a tower of desks by piling them on top of each other, starting with six then four then two and was, as we arrived, placing one last desk on top which he proceeded to climb onto. Scared I would startle him and send him crashing to the floor, I called out politely "Hello-o-o-o, can I help you?" "Oh, hello down there," he replied. "I won't be long. I'm just taking a photo of my granddaughter's name on the Honour Board."

Strange men on site (2) – Terry O'Brien

Another day, another strange man panic. This time it was before school when a TAS teacher phoned me to say she had arrived at school to find a strange man in the TAS kitchen eating food out of the refrigerator – and when she had challenged him, he had locked himself in their store room, poetically yelling "You can't catch me, I'm the thriller from Manilla!" Using the phone speaker function I dispatched any male teachers on site to the kitchen to stand guard and rang the police who arrived with siren blaring. By the time they

opened the store room door at least 800 girls had arrived at school in time to see the man half undressed being escorted across the playground to the paddy wagon, calling repeatedly “You can’t catch me, I’m the thriller from Manilla.” No need to add that this became a school catch phrase for at least a term.

Some early teaching experiences – Owen Kenny

I have been inveigled into sharing with you some of my early teaching experiences, but first I need to set the context.

In 1962 I was a first year out probationary teacher at Narrabundah High School in the ACT. Narrabundah was a new school, the first cohort of students had reached Third Year (now Year 9) and I was one of three Science teachers. The other two were women so, because of salary mismatching at the time, I was deemed the Senior Teacher (there was no Subject Master aka Head Teacher). The school was wonderfully equipped by NSW standards, because the Science requisition was not filled solely by NSW DET as it was then known, and the Federal Dept. of Interior supplied any request not provided by DET. The school even had a demonstration room with tiered seating! (This school is now a Senior College.) The students fell into mainly two groups – those who lived in the suburb of Narrabundah (a suburb originally built to accommodate the ‘workers’ who were building residences for a growing city) and Red Hill (at that time a new suburb built specifically to house the CSIRO scientists who had been re-located from Melbourne). We were obliged to record every student’s I.Q. – coded of course – and one could in most cases identify where a student resided by looking at the I.Q. (and of course vice versa).

The Touchpowder incident

On one occasion, in order to gain the interest of a very bright 1A class, I made Touchpowder for them using Ammonium tri-iodide, a very unstable compound which explodes when even a light pressure (e.g. a finger-tip) is applied. The students were suitably impressed and after the lesson one of them, a particularly bright young boy (let’s call him Ralph) asked to take some home to play a trick on his CSIRO-scientist father. I agreed. (In my defence, remember I was 19 and first-year out.) So we put four filter papers soaked in the Ammonium tri-iodide in a Petrie dish and he set off home with his plan. The next day he came to me and said he had put one filter paper under each wheel of his father’s car. I asked him about his father’s reaction, for I had previously met Ralph’s father on several occasions. Ralph said, “Well, it was a bit disappointing. When he heard the explosions, he just got out of the car and looked at the wheels, then he drove off without saying anything!” The next day, Ralph again sought me out: “Mr Kenny, sir, it was awful! When I got home yesterday after school, I touched the door of my bedroom and it went off with a loud bang! Then when I got inside, everything I touched in the bedroom exploded! It was really awful, it even stung a little bit!” Of course you will have already guessed that his father had made his own batch of Ammonium tri-iodide and came home at lunchtime to paint various surfaces in Ralph’s bedroom.

Beware Mercury and Hydrogen

I was a two-year trained teacher (A.T.C.) so several scientist-parents used to frequently correct my misunderstandings. On another occasion a student spilled Mercury (quicksilver) on the floor of the lab. The school laboratory stored no less than 5kg of Mercury. I picked it up by carefully sliding a piece of paper underneath and lifting it into a beaker. The following day one of the parents, also a CSIRO scientist, came to interview me to tell me that the Saturated Vapour Pressure of Mercury at ordinary room temperatures was way above the safety levels recommended by the World Health Organisation. He explained that the students would be okay for the exposure for them was brief, but my safety was at risk in the long term with repeated exposures because of the cumulative nature of the poison. I hadn’t even considered that one could breathe in Mercury!

In relation to the composition of the atmosphere, I was brought up to believe that the air was composed of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, water as vapour and several inert gases. When one student asked me

about Hydrogen I replied that, if the air contained Hydrogen, it would probably burn off. The following day a another CSIRO scientist came to tell me that actually there is far more Hydrogen in the atmosphere than all of the inert gases combined! Then he appeased my discomfort by telling me that I was not really incorrect because this Hydrogen exists mainly at high altitudes! I was very conscious that I was, in reality, an untrained scientist teaching the children of genuine scientists so I was very careful, at least I thought so. But I got many lessons from parents of my students, always without any animosity and always to ensure that students were not being misled.

Bang!

I mentioned that the school had a tiered-seating demonstration room. For one of my classes I was demonstrating the reduction of Copper Oxide to Copper by passing a stream of Hydrogen over it. I was generating the Hydrogen in a large Winchester bottle, safely ensconced in a wooden box, by adding Caustic Soda to Aluminium foil. But I was using some glass tubing already prepared by one of my colleagues. The reaction was going too slowly so I added a little more Caustic Soda solution to the Winchester. There was a loud explosion and the students were stunned to see their Science teacher standing in a slowly-clearing cloud of steam with a trickle of blood running down his cheek! Finally I learned – no more explosions!

Narrabundah High School was a great learning experience for me – coached by CSIRO scientists and supported by experienced staff from other schools, with some in-service experiences offered by A.N.U. – and plenty of humbling yet amazing experiences for a new graduate.

School Counsellors – Geoff Hogan

School 1

In the first school in which I was a Deputy Principal there was an excellent School Counsellor and I often included her in interviews I had with students and parents. On one occasion I had arranged for a meeting with a student and his mother. He had been moving into troublesome behaviours and had been suspended once. I wanted to assist him move away from the patterns of behaviour he had developed. His mother was a single parent and I knew that she was on methadone. I suspected that the home situation was a contributing factor to the student's deteriorating patterns of behaviour. A couple of days before the interview I met with the School Counsellor and asked her to be present and involved in the meeting. I indicated to her the strategy I proposed to take in the meeting, i.e. I would outline the facts (behaviours, consequences etc) and then discuss these with them before moving onto possible strategies, followed by having them agree to a plan for the future. All very rational, I thought. The Counsellor, with a smile, responded: "Maybe we should deal with the emotions first as the facts may not matter?" She went on to explain how dredging up past problems may irritate them, set up a 'Them versus Us' mindset and block any useful communication. We adopted the counsellor's suggested strategy and it worked. I added it to my collection of strategies and often used it both as a Deputy and Principal – and not only with students.

School 2

In the second school in which I was a DP, the School Counsellor was very different in how she operated. In one case, early in my time at this school, I invited her to be present during a discussion I was to have with a student and I asked that she provide support for the student if necessary. Early in the discussion the Counsellor began to interrogate and chastise the student in a most vigorous manner. This did not stop when the student became upset, causing me to move into a supportive role for the student and I quickly terminated the discussion. After I sent the student on his way I said to the Counsellor "For the future I need to clarify our respective roles – I am the Deputy, you are the Counsellor. I do the interrogation, and you provide support for the student." While I did have her present in some later discussions with students, I

frequently used the Head Teacher Welfare instead, who was very effective in supporting students and assisting them understand the reason for our concerns and what we expected from them.

The student referral – Geoff Hogan

In one of the schools in which I was a Head Teacher I had an excellent team of teachers. Referrals from them to me of students who had been misbehaving were infrequent. At lunch time one day one of the teachers mentioned a student who was causing him some concern. I knew the student and I said to the teacher that the student was an attention seeker and that the behaviours he'd described were attention seeking. I suggested that he ignore the student, and also mentioned the sort of situations that he could not ignore. The teacher said to me "So you saying, *Ignore The Shit?*" I replied that while they were not words that I would use, essentially that was what I was suggesting. About three weeks later the teacher mentioned to me that the strategy was working. The student had said to him "Sir, you're ignoring me." The teacher had responded to him "Yes, you're on the ITS Program." The student did ask for clarification of what ITS meant – then got on with his work.

As a follow-up to this situation, the school had a strategy whereby once a fortnight a committee would be convened and students who had been referred to the Deputy from a number of faculties would be called before it. It consisted of the Deputy Principal, two Head Teachers from faculties who were having problems with the students who were to be interviewed by the committee and a Head Teacher from a faculty who had not referred any students to the Deputy. Given the situation in my faculty, I was almost always the Head Teacher from the problem-free faculty. On one occasion the student I have mentioned appeared before the committee. The Deputy outlined his various misbehaviours then stated that he had been misbehaving in every faculty other than mine. The Deputy then asked the student what was happening in my faculty. The student replied "They've got me on the ITS program." Committee members looked at me in a questioning manner and the Deputy asked "Mr Hogan, what is the ITS Program?" I responded, "I will tell you later!"