

# First reflections upon retirement

John Frew

I have loved every stage of my career in public education and worked long past my allotted time. I had two criteria that I felt I needed to meet at the time I finally submitted the retirement paperwork. These were:

1. I would not retire feeling bitter and twisted as I had seen in some unfortunate colleagues. I understand why they felt the way they did. The constant psychological abuse directed at principals from dysfunctional students and more recently demanding parents, the increase in responsibility coupled with the decrease in support, the decisions coming out of the senior executive that for all practitioners meant more useless record keeping, the stupidity of politicians and successive ministers who become instant experts (the recent introduction of testing and teaching of phonics with babies demanded by someone with a lisp is marginally entertaining), the list goes on. But I kept reminding myself that the job has always been about the kids and they have never let me down in the long run.
2. The second was that I would know when it was time and I did. Finally after turning seventy and having had a fall that took a little too long to heal it was time.

So I approached the dreaded day with some apprehension. I have been a principal for 27 years and in that time I have exploited the fact that when the boss tells a joke it is a lot funnier than when a first year out teacher tells the same joke. I have enjoyed being treated with importance. It is quite intoxicating when everyone in your school has to get your permission to do things. It is also heady when you give a speech to the whole assembly and exciting when HSC results are posted.

I knew this would stop – and stop immediately – and it has. But as I said I knew this would happen and I was prepared for it. The farewells were hard and touching but final. One ‘farewell’ snuck up on me and knocked me for a while and I quote:

*“Goodbye from Share: Just letting you know that you have been unsubscribed from the Share mailing list for one of the following reasons: you have requested to be unsubscribed; you are not financial; you are no longer in a principal equivalent position; or, you have retired. Please direct inquiries to [nswspc.webmanager@gmail.com](mailto:nswspc.webmanager@gmail.com)”*

I hadn’t thought about being severed from my direct colleagues, my friends and peers with whom I felt I could share my thoughts. But that has happened and then I was disconnected from the directory. That didn’t hurt as much but it was still another reminder that I was no longer the identity I had been for so many years; I was no longer a teacher of children.

I have some plans that I am now putting in place that I hope will help me in my transition and maybe keep some relevance in my life.

In my early years as principal I founded Campbell House, a school for students with Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiance. These are the severe end kids we have all had who are well beyond the capabilities of our regular schools. I was barely trained in any method to deal with these kids and I knew the cognitive approach in all its manifestations did not work. The latest ‘Positive’ stuff like PBL is no different. Great for most kids and teachers but they are really little more than well packaged common sense and do nothing for these extreme end kids.

I remember being challenged by a fellow principal who had ties with Macquarie Uni to present my arguments against the establishment's belief that 'if you have the right lesson the kids will behave' – read into this 'if we have quality teachers the results will improve'. Yes, undoubtedly teachers are extremely important, but to ignore the fact that kids who come with severe disabilities such as early childhood PTSD or Autism struggle to learn the designated lesson and disturb other students' learning. These kids are not only a challenge to all teachers – they can destroy the best planned lessons.

To rise to this challenge I related the work I had been doing with neuroscience and how the brain forms and, more than how it learns, why it learns. In a nutshell we are all learning, all the time and what we learn is what we need to keep us in what is called homeostatic equilibrium. I was proud of my essay that described the limitations of cognitive interventions on students with severe behaviours that was finished in 1996 and still holds true today.

This was one of many essays I wrote and have either presented at conferences or had published in journals, particularly *Principal Matters*. So the first thing I have done is collected and had a series of essays published under the title *The Impact of Modern Neuroscience on Contemporary Teaching*. I have formally launched this and it is now available on Amazon – excuse the blatant advertisement – but I have written other books and I know they rarely pay the bills. The second book, *Insights into the Modern Classroom - Essays on the Nature of Contemporary Schooling* is now at the publishers and I am into the third and final book which is a practical guide for dealing with students with severe behaviours.

This keeps me busy and I would like to work with schools to help them but who knows? I have already been sounded out in regards to helping the staff that manage 'kids in care' facilities but nothing yet. I am extremely lucky in that my partner Marcia has also worked in and has been a principal in Juvenile Justice Schools and shares this work. It helps to have a real life muse.

I have been urged to form a company and get a webpage for opening communication and having a presence. This is an interesting exercise and I am learning a bit but I understand that as a retired person in such a dynamic environment such as contemporary schools you only have a limited time when you have credibility so this new activity is really only catering for this transition time. The web site is **Frew Consultants Group** ([www.frewconsultantsgroup.com.au](http://www.frewconsultantsgroup.com.au)) and it contains essays and a weekly newsletter - all free! I do want to give something back and this is a great way to transition into full retirement.

On top of this 'work' that is more related to my career I will travel both in Australia and overseas while I can and early trips have been good. I also received a set of golf clubs from the staff and P&C on my retirement and so I have taken to playing more often. At least (or unfortunately) I have found that golf is another form of abuse and fear I am developing late life PTSD that shows up on the golf course.

We should realise the 'end is near' and that the journey has been a blessing and so I will make sure I squeeze every last drop out of what is left. Speaking of 'drops' – food and wine are as ever crucial – and tonight I will have a silent toast to all my friends and colleagues. You have made this life something I can celebrate.

### **Contributor details**

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