Journey to Australia: An Authentic Kirinari Experience
Michael & Barbara McMorrow

Kirinari is the aboriginal word for learning. This was one of the many things we came to appreciate during a whirlwind, three week speaking tour of Australia. We had been invited by Professor Patrick Duignan, Director of the Flagship for Creative and Authentic Leadership, Australian Catholic University National to address the topic of Leading the Self-Directed School. He, along with fifteen other Australian Catholic educators, had made a visit to Mary Ward Catholic Secondary School, Centre for Self-Directed Learning last April, followed closely by another enthusiastic group November of 2004.

These teachers and leaders from elementary to post-secondary were fascinated by their discovery, half way around the globe, of such a dynamic learning community whose members were thriving through a self-directed approach to learning. Anxious to share this good news on a broader, system-wide scale, they invited Barbara and her partner to describe it first hand.

So it was that two principals from the Toronto Catholic District School Board found themselves beneath the azure skies of a sun-drenched country down under. We hit the ground running, or as the Aussies would say, “full on” – from Sydney to Broken Bay, Wollongong, Rooty Hill, Cranebrook, Adelaide, Bendigo, Echuca, Kyabram, Shepparton, Benalla, Myrtleford, Wangaratta, Wodonga, Melbourne and back to Sydney. Through the three states of New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria, we experienced places of ineffable beauty and inspirational leaders who fired our educative imaginations.

We found Australians to be a people fiercely proud of their history, their geography, their culture - of which education is an integral part – and their sport. They were the most gracious and hospitable hosts, whose genuine “howya goin’s” and “good onya’s” became infectious.

These antipodian educators proved a most receptive and keenly critical audience. As Barbara applied Michael Fullan’s model of leadership to her school’s approach to self-directed learning, the enquiry was intense: wedding the theoretical with the practical was not a foreign notion; in fact, we were astonished by the number of educators at every level who had either completed or were in the process of attaining doctoral degrees. Barbara connected Fullan’s “Moral Purpose” with the Vision of her school, derived from the “dangerous innovator” herself, Mary Ward. There were signs of affirmation as she declared that everyone in the room understood deeply the connection between moral purpose and vision, that it is the reason we were drawn to teaching in the first place, and why, when we undertake the challenge of leadership we often find ourselves explaining it as being “called” to serve, mindful of the sacred nature of our task that we see in the faces of our students every day.

Barbara explained that putting this vision into action and theory into practice had come about as a logical response to a series of challenges: if we believe, as Mary Ward did, that education is transformational, that our free will is integral to our relationship with God and that fear is to be replaced by a joyful trust, … if we believe that all individuals are
worthy and that their strengths and weaknesses are to be understood and cherished … if we believe as educators that students learn in different ways and at different rates,… if we believe that all students benefit from having a significant adult as an advocate, a mentor, and if we believe as leaders that creating communities that are welcoming and that empower people to have the courage to reach their full potential, then why not work toward making it real?

In order to make it real, it was imperative to understand the change process, the second of Fullan’s core values. Barbara described how at Mary Ward they were all about change, not as something to be feared but as something that is seminal to our journey as human beings and most especially as Catholics, and that in order to respond in a meaningful way to emerging challenges in a rapidly changing world, a personalized approach to learning was necessary where flexible scheduling can allow students to control and direct their own learning.

This was clearly new territory for the Aussies whose wistful smiles and nods of assent had begun to fade a little at the introduction of the “change” imperative: it appeared that they had been as beleaguered as we by seemingly constant revision of curriculum and government scrutiny from both Commonwealth and State levels, and of course, by the ominous presence of the Year 12 certification exams, the results of which often determined the status and enrolment of schools. But their enthusiasm did not wane for long, spurred on by the discussion of Fullan’s third value, Building Relationships. At Mary Ward, the key to this vital human construction is their exemplary Teacher Advisor Program: every student is part of a group of about fifteen peers from various grades who are advised by one teacher for their entire high school career. We found this notion to be quite familiar to the Australians as we learned of their “Pastoral Care”, a similar vertical mentoring with which they were involved.

The next aspect of Knowledge Creation and Sharing was yet another familiar concept. While their schools could not boast Mary Ward’s interactive environment that offered students and teaches easy and frequent access to each other, the non-credit system for the high school years of grades 7 to 10 allowed for a degree of flexibility with timetabling that conventional schools in Ontario do not enjoy. Though the Australian schools we visited did not have the open architectural design of the Mary Ward building that supports the ongoing dialogue and continuous progress of the teaching and learning relationship, many of their physical plants incorporated both the natural surroundings and the climate with series of ranch-style buildings connected by courtyards and flowered walkways. In the primary schools, which tend to go from Reception to grade 6, the learning is often organized by stages rather than grades so that team teaching of a 1/2, 3/4 or 5/6 classroom was not uncommon.

Michael, in his description of Blessed Mother Teresa as a learning community in transition between a traditional and interactive environment, was able to help the Australians see such inherent flexibility as opportunities for moving incrementally towards a self-directed approach to learning. He described efforts to make learning the constant and time the variable as Ward has succeeded in doing: at Blessed Mother
Teresa, moving to a single lunch period enabled all staff and students to be together, and forming collaborative interdisciplinary teams using common prep times had enhanced knowledge creation and sharing. An innovative multiple intelligences approach to learning, along with a credit recovery program had helped both staff and students to move along the continuum of assessment for learning to a more responsive assessment for learning that provides feedback for both student and instructional improvement. This had created the possibility of assessment as learning, common at Mary Ward, wherein the teacher helps the student to participate in the actual design and setting of criteria for assessment tasks. At Blessed Mother Teresa, increasing the amount of group work by which students engage in self and peer evaluation, had also helped the students to take control of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of their learning.

This was yet another concept with which the Aussies were well familiar – the progression they had made along the Assessment continuum had become clear to us from the outset. Most educators we met seemed intensely focused on improvement of their own and student learning. Perhaps the paid study leaves after ten years of service and the encouragement of principals to walk in the footsteps of their founders served to make the idea of professional development central to the educational task. At any rate, during the workshop sessions, Michael’s suggestions for incremental change were eagerly received and most forgot the initial obstacles as they considered possible scenarios for putting students at the centre of their learning; even the concern about state examinations was assuaged by the awareness of the Mary Ward students’ success in provincial testing and their high post-secondary acceptance and retention rates.

So, two Canadian principals went half way around the world to share an approach to learning that Alexander Pope would describe as “oft thought, but ne’er so well expressed” and returned home much richer for the experience. What we found were many inspirational Catholic educators committed to providing the very best opportunities for their learning communities to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Not surprising that they should be interested in self-directed learning as a means to this end, considering the ground-breaking work that had already been started by the IDEAS (Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievements in Schools) project in Queensland or the Essential Learnings framework identified as Communicating, Social Responsibility, Personal Futures and World Futures in Tasmania and South Australia. We met whole communities of people looking outward, beyond their own beautiful borders, hungry for knowledge and happy and proud to share their own. We were inspired by their focus on “Pastoral Care” and the way that Catholicity permeates the relationship of school, family and Church. We were moved by the imperative of environmental sustainability that is interwoven throughout their visioning and curriculum development. And we were most impressed with their support of ongoing professional learning and the shared leadership that naturally emerges.

The experience of teaching the Australians about Leading in a Self-directed School has had a boomerang effect on us: we know that we are now better educators and leaders – it is our hope that in sharing our journey, others may be similarly inspired.