

Keynote 4, John Marsden

Notes from the presenter.....

Status permeates our lives and our culture all day every day. "Whenever two or more people are gathered together..." status will begin to operate :-). As a writer I know that comedy can be easily achieved by manipulating status. Now James knows it too :-). Schools are riddled with status. Kids who are alienated and depressed by their school experience may well be reacting to the constant message of inferior status that they are receiving. Being made to sit on the floor, given inadequate or unclean toilets to use, refused access to certain parts of the school (including the front door), are subtle messages of low status that will be the daily experience of most kids.

Actually, calling them kids is likely to contribute to a perception of children as having low status!

The fact that teachers wear what they like, have access to most or all parts of the school, have more comfortable chairs and bigger desks, have better toilet facilities, have a special staff room... all of this adds to the imbalance. Being on a platform and having a microphone are also very powerful!

We love seeing low status people gain status, and we love seeing high status people lose it. We don't enjoy seeing low status people become lower or high status people become higher.

One of the secrets of life is to be able to change status according to the situation. The most successful teachers do this, seemingly almost effortlessly.

Another of the secrets of life is to be able to play equal status with the person with whom you are dealing, rather than going to a higher or lower status level.

But it's also important for a teacher to be able to "get the last word" if necessary; in other words, to be able to "pull rank" when the situation demands it.

Language is a powerful indicator of status. Fluent speakers command more respect and attention than people who are awkward, stumbling, hesitant. Certain words carry status implications. "Please" is often a low status word, but "thank you" is a high status one. Low status people apologise all the time, for everything, whether it's their fault or not.

Whilst on the subject of language... one of the most powerful things we can do, not just as school leaders but as individuals, is to recapture our lost voices. Children are born with their own unique visions of the world, which as they grow, is frequently expressed through their language. But "every child is a poet until she's eight years old." Gradually language-use becomes more and more bleak, more and more mundane. I think this is partly because we all want to avoid the mocking laughter of the powerful grown-ups. A pernicious and destructive habit in our society is the way we make fun of children who are using language beautifully, vividly, poetically. Gradually the child learns to use language in the same stereotyped way as everybody else, until we end up with lifeless job applications and school newsletters full of bureaucratic gobbledeygook.

I also spoke briefly about Candlebark, and our determination to have our students engage with the world, through frequent excursions and incursions (mostly at low cost.) I want children to have first-hand experiences. Most young people nowadays seem to experience life at second hand, via a television screen, or by listening to the stories of their parents/grandparents. Climbing trees, rolling down hills, playing with sticks and stones and mud and dirt, having space -- these are basic entitlements of children. The pandemic of fear in Western society, which has been raging for several decades now, is characterised by the

unusual desire of its sufferers to inflict it on others. Fearful people frequently quote the legal system to justify placing severe restrictions on children. The fact is that the Australian (and British) legal systems consistently support schools and teachers against silly and over-legalistic claims by parents. (And, although I did not mention this at the conference, it is equally disingenuous to claim that insurance companies don't allow adventurous activities for children -- we have no problems getting insurance, at quite a reasonable price, for all the activities that our children do, including horseriding, camping, surfing, skiing and canoeing.)

Candlebark is structured in such a way as to allow teachers to teach. We have as few meetings as possible, class sizes are small, and report writing is kept to a minimum. Although we haven't created a paradise, and although we have had a number of students leave (mostly in our first four years), we do have a school where the students appear to be happy, trusting and confident, able to engage well with visitors, and where they are well connected with their school work. But we haven't yet solved the problem of restless boys who would rather be building rock-dams in the creek than sitting at a desk. That could be partly because the principal would rather be building rock-dams in the creek than sitting at his desk, as he is now to write this!