

An Hour with Anne Babich

Anne Babich became the Principal at Rowville Primary School in July 2004, but she had garnered plenty of experience, including over a decade as a Principal prior to that.

Anne was born in Box Hill Hospital to Croatian migrants who had fled their homeland. It was a traditional tight-knit family. Dad provided for the family while Mum maintained the home. Living and growing up in Blackburn South with her two younger brothers, Anne recalls that the suburb was full of young families with lots of children. Anne recalls hearing the “clip clop” of the milk man’s horse in the early hours of the morning and bread was delivered daily by the baker in the small red van. The roads were unpaved and kids played outside. There was a paddock nearby that had a creek, declared dangerous by her parents, where Anne remembers clearly the tree house that had been built by the kids in the neighbourhood. “It was at this time that my mother says I showed my first signs of becoming a teacher, as I sat my young brother down after school every day and made him learn all my lessons” recalls Anne.

Her parents placed a very high premium on education and learning.

Anne attended Warrawong Primary School and Blackburn South High School. At the age of seventeen she graduated from secondary school and enrolled at Teacher’s College, where she completed a three year Diploma in Primary Teaching. Her first teaching position was in West Sunshine. She enrolled at Monash University, where over four years she completed an Arts degree, majoring in Sociology and Philosophy, whilst holding down a full time teaching position. If Anne had done an additional year of study she would have been a qualified social worker. So from her very first year of teaching her actions demonstrated her commitment to ongoing learning. In order to be closer to Monash University, in her second year of teaching she applied for a compassionate transfer to Doveton, something that Anne believes nobody had done before. However, as it turned out it was the building block for the rest of her career. Anne recalls “I was working in a tough school with an innovative Principal who loved learning and provided opportunities for teachers to undertake professional learning.” Anne was funded by the Pakenham and District Cluster to undertake a week long intensive writing seminar at Riverina CAE. Other participants included people like the famous children’s author, Mem Fox. “It was through this that I unlocked my passion for literacy, and I made sure no child left my classroom not reading. I even bought books for kids as prizes.

By the end of her third year at that school, other teachers from across the district were coming to visit her classroom. Anne then accepted a post as Head Teacher at Port Albert Primary School in South Gippsland. She completed a Masters degree in Education by correspondence from the University of New England in Armidale NSW, travelling

there in the school holidays for five years to complete the residential requirement of this course.

She returned to Melbourne in the mid-eighties to take up a position as “Literacy and Numeracy” consultant with the education department. She worked in both primary and secondary schools classrooms and school communities, in the inner city and Bayside suburbs. She learnt how to develop and track budgets and how to lobby for funding. Anne says, “This change of environment gave me a much fuller understanding of the workings of the broader education system and the role that education plays in creating a better society.”

The depth of the cuts to the education budget in the early 90’s signalled the end of the consultancy role. There were options at this time, but the passion to nurture young children, resulted in a return to a school. Anne was selected as Assistant Principal at Doveton Primary School. After two and a half years in this role, Anne was selected to be Principal of Aldercourt Primary School, a medium sized school, in what was then, the seventh poorest suburb in Victoria. “Poverty and disadvantage were the sources of complexity in my work at that time.”

Anne was one of the youngest Principals in the State and recalls that “This was a tough assignment, but I made sure that when everyone else had given up on a child, I would be the last person standing.” In fact, Anne was awarded a Centenary Medal in 2000 by the then Prime Minister, John Howard, for “outstanding service to education as a school principal”.

In 2004, Anne was selected as Principal of Rowville Primary School and is delighted with the way the School has grown and developed over the last eight years. I am most proud of the way the team at Rowville, with no exceptions, are committed to “making our best, better”. It is an honour to be serving a community that values education and where parents work with the school to support their children’s learning.

An interesting revelation was Anne’s recollection of sport whilst she was a student at school. “Unless you showed a natural talent for a specific sport, you simply didn’t receive any encouragement or training and I would have liked to have been a netball player” remembers Anne. I was the one that was left out so I buried myself in books. Today, reading, walking and many happy hours in her garden are how Anne unwinds. She also searches for ‘art deco’ artefacts, because “I love design” she says.

For the last six years Anne has been a principal facilitator in the state-wide ‘Emerging Leaders’ programme, where she works with a group of ten emerging leaders over a full school year. She considers it a privilege to have a part in shaping the future leaders of our education system and believes her mission as a leader is to grow other leaders. During her eight years at Rowville, one teacher has become an assistant principal and two of her assistant principals have been promoted as principals. Other teachers have also been recognised as leaders and she was extremely proud when two of her young teachers were invited earlier this year to share their work at a major



international literacy conference in Sydney.

Work is intertwined into her lifestyle. Anne has travelled widely, mostly on study tours that have taken in America, Asia, and Europe, including participation in a leadership program at Harvard University. A recent visit to Croatia was the exception, where Anne enjoyed visiting places where her parents grew up and is proud that she was able to test her bilingual expertise.

From time to time, Anne has been deeply saddened by adversities that strike families and recognises that school is often a place of safe refuge for the children. “These experiences have given me a greater appreciation and understanding of life in general and the importance that families play in the lives of children”. She believes that parents and teachers have a moral obligation to work together to nurture children, to build a solid and strong fabric of society.

Anne is driven by a passion for what she is doing. The opportunity to influence teaching and learning, have given Anne her greatest satisfaction and says leadership is about serving others, not self. Being selected to serve others is a privilege and an honour, which I have been fortunate to do as Principal for over eighteen years. “I hope that I will be remembered as someone who has contributed to the building of futures, dreams and hopes for children. I hope that I instil in all children a love of learning and that they will remember their time in schools under my leadership with fondness” says Anne.

To those youngsters considering a future in education Anne’s advice is ‘Work hard, set goals, and keep persevering until you achieve’. Her future goals, perhaps, completing a doctorate or working on an education project in an indigenous community or in an undeveloped third world country. Several of her teachers have been urging her to write a book about her experiences in order to inspire others to aspire to be a principal. “All kids have a right to a good education and we need to do whatever it takes to make it the very best that it can be for all children” she says.

Interviewed by David Gilbert