

Aspects of Flexi Practice

Exploring ways of working in EREA Flexible Schools | Ed. 04 JULY, 2023



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Some practice wisdom from Paul Flanders

Compiled by Dr Ann Morgan

Paul Flanders was the foundation Principal of the Marlene Moore Flexi Schools Network, established in 2013. His work as an educator included being Head of Campus at Albert Park Flexi School, Deputy Principal at Seton College as well as working as a Maths, Science teacher at a range of mainstream schools.

His varied career also included working as a Sports Physio and running his own business growing trees and running a horse stud.

Paul's commitment to radical inclusion and compassion, accompanied by his practical guidelines for being a professional educator in Flexible Schools, has been a hallmark of his 8 years of leadership as Principal.

This edition provides an overview of ways of working in a flexi school, that was created by Paul Flanders, during the course of his time as Principal of the Marlene Moore Flexi Schools Network (2013 - 2020).



A Quick Guide to Working in a Flexi

Paul Flanders

- 1) *Know your young people really well and let them know that you genuinely care about them.*
- 2) *Be professional in every aspect of your work and keep young people at the centre.*
- 3) *Have fun at work and be supportive of and engaged with the community.*

Edmund Rice Education Flexible Schools are complex places. They have a staff mix of Teachers, Social Workers, Youth Workers, Administration Workers, Chaplains and others. This coupled with a cohort of young people with an amazing mix of personalities, histories, life experiences, behaviours, stories and expectations, means that these are vibrant and sometimes challenging workplaces.

How Flexi Schools work

Flexi schools have no rules, no uniforms, no fees and no religious requirements for attendees. Couple this with working from a framework of two very complex, concepts:

Operation by Principles (Respect, Participation, Honesty and Safe & Legal) and Common Ground alongside daily life and interactions can be colourful. Staff induction, formation and training introduces these two key concepts and also touches on Trauma Informed Practice(TIP), de-escalation and nonviolent intervention training, critical reflective practice, empathy, Collaborative Problem Solving(CPS) and other concepts and skills that are of assistance to workers.

These are all wonderful for a worker's "toolbox". However, the work is based on *relationships* and if we don't start here, then the use and application of these valuable skills and tools, and daily work itself, can be challenging.

Guests in the lives of young people

We walk with, work alongside, and share the lives of these young people and we are guests in their lives for a brief part of their life journey. To do this well we must really seek to know and understand them well.

Inclusive Communities

Flexi schools need to be warm, welcoming, non-judgmental and inclusive communities. They need to be the 'family' that many of these young people have never had. Unconditional acceptance and love should be the dominant themes. We must have a belief in the inherent goodness and potential of every young person. It is our challenge to provide each one with a sense of a *hope-filled future*. Traditional "power over" responses to sometimes obnoxious, offensive, disrespectful and possibly violent behaviours, will simply perpetuate the responses and behaviours that the young people have exhibited in the past. It will often reinforce and engrain in them the false perception that they are a failure or dumb or worthless.

One of our biggest challenges is to be able to let go of this power over people and opt out of "black and white" solutions. We need to embrace the 'power with' position that flows from Common Ground.

Some young people actually realise for the first time in their lives that they can learn.

Staff professionalism

Our young people deserve the very best professionalism and work ethic from all staff. The academic program needs to be flexible so young people have the opportunity to learn when they are ready to learn and at their level so that they can experience success. Some actually realise for the first time in their lives that they can learn. We need to be punctual, well planned, and fully engaged at all times. We must be constantly checking in with young people, problem solving and thinking outside the square about ways to provide education programs that are both appropriate and relevant to the individual needs of the young person.

These young people are the most valuable resource in our country, and they deserve the very best of our talents and energy.



We should smile and laugh often and enjoy our work and our community. These are special places!

Work should be fun!

Finally, 'work should be fun!' Flexi schools should be *joyful places*. We should smile and laugh often and enjoy our work and our community. These are special places. It is a privilege to be able to work in what really are some of the most authentic Catholic Schools in the Edmund Rice tradition and potentially some of the best educational settings available to young people.



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The Take Home Messages:

(As the sharpener said to the pencil - "let's get straight to the point!")

- 1) **The answer is ALWAYS relationships.**
- 2) **Leave your ego at the door.**
- 3) **Have fun!**
- 4) **Smoking/Vaping is NOT the problem!**
- 5) **Punishment and consequences do not really work - we use Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) conversations**
- 6) **We are not here to fix anyone!**
- 7) **The Principles are ASPIRATIONAL (they should be used as the basis for conversations and NOT used as rules).**
- 8) **"Attitude problems" and challenging behaviours are probably due to a lack of 'skills'.**
- 9) **Listen (really listen) carefully and actively.**
- 10) **Observe and be patient (things often get worse before they get better when changing behaviours, and it takes time).**
- 11) **Be prepared to 'bite your tongue' our "common sense solutions" often will not work.**
- 12) **Inclusion is VERY hard work, but exclusion is a failure.**
- 13) **Be gentle with the young people and yourself.**
- 14) **Real empathy, kindness and understanding lead to love.**

These come as a package 😊



At a new staff induction program, Paul presented his *Take Home Messages* to the group gathered. Paul always spoke with a practical sense of honesty and wisdom gathered from a long and rich career as an educator.



Paul Flanders

In the spirit of Ubuntu and Presence, Compassion and Liberation, we are present among, and stand in solidarity with those who are victims of any form of disadvantage, marginalisation and exclusion.





Some further thoughts for reflection:

Many of the ways of working with young people in Flexi Schools require common sense and human decency.

- Can we treat young people, parents/carers, colleagues, and ourselves, with dignity and kindness, and see the best in each other?
- Do we make assumptions that are not grounded in reality or facts, but in our own opinions, preferences and perceptions?
- What if we really believed that young people want to learn and that the job of educators is to identify and remove barriers that stop them learning, growing and living their lives to the full?

Sometimes the greatest barriers can be within our own minds and thoughts - the deficit views we have absorbed from our dominant culture and conventional wisdom that no longer fits or applies to our current reality.

Given what we are learning about our brains, our social conditioning, and our immense potential to learn and grow, it is so important to use reflective practice to change our limiting mindsets.

After working closely with Paul Flanders during his 8 years of being Principal, I realised that his down to earth approach and practical wisdom was a gift for all of us.

**“Our schools
should be radical,
counter-cultural places;**

**Focused on engagement, not
outcomes;**

**Love and forgiveness,
not consequences;**

Choices, not demands;

Conversations, not rules;

**Inclusion and support,
Not exclusion and
punishment.”**

Paul Flanders, 2019

This practical wisdom, kept at the forefront of our approach to everyday practice with young people in flexis, supports and enables learning outcomes. When the conditions for psychological, intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural safety are prioritised through relationships first; guided by Operation by Principles and Common ground; and supported through daily conversations, working agreements and collaborative problem-solving, self-directed learning and a range of outcomes, both accredited and non-accredited, will follow.

A Quick Guide to Working in a Flexi, and ***The Take Home Messages***, are well worth our attention and focus for individual and team reflection. Without reflection it is too easy to forget our values and fall back into fixed habits that may not be serving young people or ourselves and our colleagues.

Thanks Paul for the inspiration and wisdom.

Ann Morgan