



Profile: Catherine Fullerton

Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children

Roll up roll up, the sideshow alley has come to town! Just picture it. The twinkling lights, the dodgem cars, the kewpie dolls on sticks high up in the air. For many of us, it's easy to imagine being a child wandering through the sideshow alley of a metropolitan or regional show. But what about being the child of one of the alley's many vendors who operate the rides, the food stalls, the games? Is it never-ending fun, with never-ending fairy floss? And do you still have to go to school?

If you're lucky enough to attend the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, then yes, you certainly do. But according to its dynamic Principal, Catherine Fullerton, '...romance doesn't come into it at all! There might be paradise outside the caravan window each night the show's on', she says, 'but underneath that are some very, very hardworking families who have values for education, and who want their children to have choices that perhaps they didn't quite have.'

Funded by the Federal and Queensland governments, the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children was established in 2000 after years of lobbying by parents in the Showmen's Guild of Australasia, eager to provide their children with educational consistency and continuity. Importantly for Fullerton, while the school is on wheels (towed by a Mack truck), the emphasis should be on its similarity with stationary schools, not its difference. 'The daily life of the children now in terms of access to education', she says, 'isn't any different than any other residential setting.'

As the show must always go on, the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children is on the road 52 weeks of the year, travelling through both the big cities and regional towns. When I speak to Fullerton, they've just pulled up in Sydney for the Royal Easter Show: 'life is never dull', she chuckles. No arguments there – the school provides an excursion program to die for. But how, I ask Fullerton, is the curriculum adapted to fit in with the children's adventure prone lives?



'Well it's that core statement', Fullerton says, 'that we know in our hearts and souls as teachers – that every opportunity is a learning opportunity. So, whilst the stability of curriculum is there in that we're an Education Queensland state primary school, and therefore implementing the full range of curricula, we're also able to link in with various places, and use those opportunities from our travels to complement the teaching curriculum.'

On a typical week during show time, when the parents go off to work, the Mack truck parks at the grounds of the respective local school and lessons resume inside the mobile classroom. Then, at recess and lunch, the show children go out into the playground to

meet with the children of the host school. 'Like all children there are a range of levels of confidence', Fullerton says, when I question the children's adaptability in doing this, week after week. 'And so you're (as a teacher) creating opportunities for the children to develop their confidences and what better way to do it than through play and sport and social settings.'

Catherine Fullerton's passion as teacher and Principal is infectious. Her key message, she explains, is that progress doesn't happen 'unless you've got heart and soul commitment to your craft as a teacher. And to your belief that you can make a difference to the children.' However it becomes apparent, during our conversation, that Fullerton's vision stretches further than the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children.

'As Australians', says Fullerton, 'we should be putting our hands up and saying to the rest of the world - like in countries where there is severe disadvantage, that the design of these classrooms [i.e. of the travelling school], with satellite technology and internet connection, could actually work in Afghanistan or Iraq or Africa or outback Australia; or anywhere that we could eliminate the tyranny of distance and the tyranny of marginalisation. We can't allow the children in any society not to achieve what they're capable of.'

Rebecca Meston

