

Timeless Learning [A book review]

How Imagination, Observation, and Zero-Based Thinking Change Schools

By Ira Socol, Pam Moran, Chad Ratliff

Review by Richard Wells [@EduWells](#)

I'm in the middle of leading a two year [transformation of our high school](#) and so when the book *Timeless Learning* was highlighted to me (thanks [@andykaifong](#)), it looked like a perfect companion. I thought I'd add my perspective to the popular quotes from the book in regards to my own school's redesign of teaching and learning. The three authors start with a very simple question: "Do you see your children in your school?" This they compare with the things that dominate the minds of teachers and blind them from 'seeing' the children: lessons, topics, technology, assessments, resources, and staff politics? These are generally the things teachers discuss with each other and thus surprisingly rarely talk about the issues of children and learning. This issue [I have discussed before](#) because it reminds us we worry far more about what things we do rather than why we do them.

One of the Authors tells a familiar personal experience that highlights that because existing school models encourage teachers to focus their role of delivering topics and tests (what) it leads to many relationships between disengaged students & their teachers developing an "uneasy truth" in the classroom that - "You don't bother me and I won't bother you." The personal story also highlights that rather than develop new skills and understandings, most students only get appreciated by teachers and acknowledged in situations where they best conform to the prewritten programme because they already possess the required skills and talents they've obtained elsewhere in the first place. Another favourite topic of mine the book quickly arrives at is teaching

as inquiry (something compulsory in New Zealand teaching). Defining part of the teaching role as inquiring into your own practice rebalances the focus away from the topics and onto the children. In the Author's story, this lead a math teacher to always check each class activity with the question: What's the connection between the math teaching and math learning? Teaching and learning WITH the students, recognising the status of students as equal, allows the teacher to request advice from the students after lessons. Making it normal for students to suggest "If you teach this again, make sure you ..." To add to this "When they are not engaged in what we want to them to learn, we need to question ourselves rather than blame them.

An ugly truth mentioned in the book that I agree with is that "Schools of the 20th century were designed to fail students." Not enough high schools consider this as we discuss the transformation of schools in 2018. The format of 20th century education was to filter a minority percentage of management potential (decision makers) from the regular labour majority (instruction followers). Teachers are not comfortable acknowledging it but the standard education system still used in nearly all high schools was designed decades ago primarily to confirm who is NOT management material rather than worry at all about who you might be. Most people (including myself) left school only knowing they weren't one of the top students and not knowing much else about oneself or where I might end up in life.

With this in mind, the book requests teachers and administrators to reimagine the purpose of the things they dedicate most of our time to: "Curricula exist to provide children opportunities to learn, not to limit their explorations. Standards exist to guide the development of learning opportunities for children, not to judge their worthiness. Tests and assessments exist to facilitate children's learning, not to shame and label them. **As a result, we are never to allow children's learning to be dictated by curricula , standards , or tests.**"

It makes a suggestion that aligns with my own school's transformation approach. It asks administrators to start "Making decisions differently, decisions driven by values." In my school we took the approach that started with each Value listed in the national curriculum, developed some driving questions around the issues associated with the value and then asked existing specialisms to group together to tackle the driving question. This value-first approach leads the traditional topics to serve a greater aim and exist in context to each other rather than all being abstract and isolated.

"Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting."

Now, if you think that's much to think about, you need to know that I've only read the first chapter! I highly recommend this book and will be using its insights many times during our [school learning transformation](#).