

Do we need to change the mindset of 'school reunions'?

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I have recently had cause to reflect upon school reunions. I know, some people love ‘em; some people hate ‘em. But what is it that causes the desire to reconnect with people from our past — or not want to reconnect?

The subject interested me enough to conduct a survey on the subject. Here's the simple question I asked:

What are your first thoughts when you hear the words 'school reunion'?

With the people I surveyed, there was no middle ground, reunions seem to be something you love or loath:

- ‘fear, horror, regrets...’
- ‘boring, recognition or lack of, waste of time....’
- “too far away (distance), fun, laughter, amazement...”
- “quite cool, would like, love to see what people are doing now, but too far away (distance)”



So, apart from the issue of distance (real or an excuse?), some of the reasons for the appeal, or not, are one/s experiences with the people with whom you went to school.

THE APPEAL AND BENEFITS

Are there any benefits, and what is it that makes reunions work for those who attend them? Here are a couple of anecdotal personal examples that really highlight what makes a reunion.

Last week I had the pleasure of taking my Mum to the 150th Owaka reunion. My mother's short-term memory is failing and I was concerned that the day would be too much for her. How wrong could I be! Not only did she cope with the day, she thrived. She loved the visit to the cemetery to share stories of her ancestors; the visit to the remains of the family home to reminisce; and the viewing of the photos and memorabilia from long ago. One real highlight was finding her school class photo from many decades ago. Not only did she recognise each and every person, she could recall where in the valley they lived, who their siblings were and more. She was also able to recall precious memories of her learnings from her teacher, and share the impact he has had on her life.



Recently, I was privileged to celebrate the reunion of 'our year' at high school. The unique aspect of a reunion exclusive to our year held significant appeal for me. I would know — really know — most of the people who would be reuniting, and it was significantly long ago for me to have a genuine desire to reconnect. So what happened?

In every way, the reunion exceeded my high expectations. From first meetings to tearful farewells the weekend was filled with laughter, reminiscing, and reconnecting. My greatest surprise was that there wasn't even really time for exploring where we are at now and what we have become. We were intrinsically, intimately connected with shared memories, experiences, and perceived happenings. It was mesmerising to leap from conversation to conversation, remembering, sharing our views, and our ideas of how certain events played out. Our time was spent reliving favourite or funny moments from teachers, or classes. Much sharing was around our perceptions of fairness, or lack of, surrounding events.



Our reunion was a celebration of reigniting our connectedness. It appeared without competition or rivalry. As I reflect now on who was present and who wasn't, is this, in itself a measure of the worth of a reunion?

Again, the strong theme is the people and experiences with those people. Reunion is the opportunity to reconnect, whether that be to reminisce or to find out where and what our former classmates are today.

But the question for me was: How was it that we never had a moment to really check in and share our current family stories; our reality now? Maybe, that is not the role of a reunion nowadays. Maybe social media takes care of that aspect. We now have a large number of people connected on our Facebook page and the sharing continues. Would the degree and intimacy of sharing we now have, happened, or even have been possible, had we not had the face-to-face reunion to reignite the connections.

WHAT WERE THE KEY BENEFITS FOR US?

- Reconnecting with significant people from our past;
- Retrieving memories stored;
- Revisiting our self from a previous time;
- Reflection on life journey;
- Mindful stocktaking of where we are at on our journey!

WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE OF REUNIONS?

Are the appealing features of reunions likely to overcome issues of travelling distance for future potential attendees in years to come? And, even the not-too-distant future?

We are possibly the last of the 'forgettable era' where events are often only recalled by our memories and a scant collection of photos. Much of the schooling of our youth is now recorded digitally: via blogs, or sites, or video and photo collections. Technology is affording a rich record of our learning journeys. Social media is affording the ability to easily keep in touch across space and time.

Will reunions even be a thing of the future? As our social networking allows us to be connected with others in a way simply not possible in the past, is there a danger that this detracts from the desire, or need, for a physical reunion or reconnection? Are we so in touch with the lives of our colleagues via the likes of Facebook that we neglect opportunities to reconnect face to face? Is there scope beyond either/or to both virtual and face-to-face?

What, then, does this phenomenon mean for schools and educators and the school communities that cross generations? It is a question that needs to be asked in order to benefit schools and their students (former and current). Here are some related questions that may be useful for discussion.

Questions for us as educators:

- What is the purpose or goal of a reunion and what is our mindset around reunions?
- What will reunions of the future entail?
- What determines our 'readiness' to reunite?
- Is storage of our 'multi-media' sufficient and future-proof?
- Is technology the friend and the foe in the reunion dilemma?
- Are we recording multiple perspectives of our schooling journeys? Are they bicultural? Multicultural?

Questions about reunions:

- Is a reunion an opportunity to reconnect with the person you were at an earlier point of time?
- Is a reunion a snapshot; a portrait of you in a bygone era?
- Is a reunion about re-establishing a relationship with friends from the past?
- Is it about your desire to reflect on your life journey?
- If we have a classroom culture of relational trust that carries us forward, is a reunion even necessary?



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