

Candlebark and Alice Miller revisited

Bill Minnis on John Marsden's helicopter free zone



When I first met John Marsden two years back (*Education Today* 2016 Vol 16 (2)

Term 2) he was mulling over what might be the optimum number of students for his Alice Miller [recently-opened] and Candlebark schools.

"We could take up to 200 students at each school," Marsden said then "but that would be tops, when we had 180 at Candlebark last year, it felt a bit tight so maybe we'll settle for around 160."

But when we met again during Term 2 this year, he was thinking about how best to handle the 2019 waiting lists for both schools to keep the total under 200 at each. And for now, the solution will be

to continue with Year 7 at Candlebark in parallel with Year 7 at Alice Miller.

"We were not going to continue with Year 7 at both but with 217 booked in already for Alice Miller we will need to have a Year 7 at Candlebark ... we could not turn around and tell parents we had already accepted that they can't come, so we have had to work out a way to manage the numbers," Marsden said.

For the only educator in Australia who owns his schools, it's a nice problem to have and the thought that demand for places at Alice Miller has caused something of a property boom in the Macedon area makes him smile – "the local real estate agents love us."

And where do these families come from? Glamorous Hollywood for one,

while an Indian family recently upped stakes and moved to Australia for their boys' secondary schooling at Alice Miller. "They came for a try-out for couple of weeks last year, liked it, and started school with us a few weeks ago."

That leads to the next question – Why would parents choose Candlebark or Alice Miller? It can't be for the built environment because Candlebark looks, frankly, like a cheerful but a bit dishevelled bush camp while Alice Miller's cluster of unassuming buildings sit close to the earth, camouflaged by dense native plantings.

A 10m enclosed heated swimming pool and a meadow that goes by the name 'The Golf Course' and a soccer pitch are Alice Miller's sports facilities while the



'soccer pitch' at Candlebark is a sloping paddock.

"Every year the students ask me when we will have a 'proper' level pitch and I tell them that it's good for you to play on a rocky, crazy, sloped surface because when you go to the local club to play on an artificial surface, it will be easy when you are used to playing on ours."

Not for helicopter parents

On the other hand, few schools can offer the schools' huge expanses of bush to explore and learn in. And explore they do, within well-judged and carefully calibrated rules that are laid out on page 50 of Candlebark's Policy Manual (<http://www.candlebark.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Candlebark-policies.pdf>).

#5 states: 'Children of Grade 4 age or older are allowed into the bush, but only in groups of three minimum. They must take with them a first aid kit and a walkie-talkie. They must report out to a teacher. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the students have a first aid kit and a walkie-talkie, and know how to use the walkie-talkie. Students must inform the teacher of the direction in which they are going and how long they expect to be away.

And #9 reads: 'Children are taught from their earliest years at Candlebark in class and out of class (during cleanup and Friday electives) how to interact with domestic and farm animals in a way which will ensure the safety of both the children and the animals. Apart from snakes, spiders and insects, there are no wild crea-

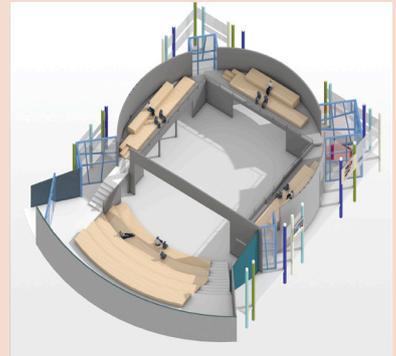
tures on the property which pose a threat to humans ... given that there have been no Drop Bear sightings in recent years.'

Helicopter parents will likely not want to trust their offspring to either school. For those that do, Marsden undertakes to turn out school leavers who are ready for whatever adult path they choose.

Path for life learning

Alice Miller opened with a plan to enrol students based on music or dance auditions, or a portfolio of artwork and while this hasn't been implemented for 2018, Marsden is confident that, with the waiting list developing, it's not far into the future. Meanwhile, an interview is mandatory and sometimes a student will do a trial day or two to get a sense of what they are like.

Alice Miller Theatre



When completed the Alice Miller Theatre, designed by Marcus Roberts Architect, will be the first building that visitors will see as they arrive at the school's gates. The theatre-in-the-round will seat up to 200 on ground and balcony levels. Pivot doors will be used to enclose dressing rooms and stage wings when needed, while the tiered seating area can be partitioned off by bi-fold doors to create a lecture space.



“We really take every student, except one with such destructive behaviour that we say to the parents that our level of monitoring and supervision is much less than other schools and we don’t think it would work because the child seems to need very close monitoring and regulation, but that’s only in extreme cases.

“Our academic standards are high because our aim is to have them leave here so that any door they want to open can be opened. Whatever they want to do ... whether they want to build a miniature house and live in a paddock at Yandoit, or travel to Pakistan and work with beggars, or do a medical degree at Melbourne, or go to Finland and get a job as a nuclear scientist.

“We are not doing them any favours if we teach them in a way that they can’t do the things they want to do, that’s why we try to make it as broad as possible to give them the powers and the confidence they need to engage with the world.

“Our children are incredibly resilient and have an inner strength which is remarked upon by anyone who deals with them – be it during work experience or when they meet people just by chance. People who meet them on hikes or canoe trips comment on how extraordinarily self-sufficient and confident they are.

“By contrast, an acquaintance of mine is working full time at one of the big ‘name’ independent schools and has commented that the difference between the kids here

is ‘absolutely astounding’, ours can speak out and converse with adults whereas the ones at the other school are timid, diffident, self-effacing, ‘passive’ is the word that came up time and again.

“This isn’t the way to prepare them for an adult world.”

Tuned to teens

We sat in the Alice Miller café to talk – real coffee made by a café staffer who greeted Marsden with a cheerful “Good morning John, what can I get you?”

While she got busy with the espresso machine, others laid out a table of cheese chunks, sausage, crackers, fruit and drinks. It wasn’t coming close to lunch time but as we talked, knots of students arrived, helped themselves to a snack or heated a drink in the microwave, chatted for a couple of minutes and moved on to their next class.

“Humans evolved as hunter gatherers and teens need to graze as they go,” Marsden noted. And that’s in line with the school’s 10.30am class start time, when teens’ circadian rhythm cycle is set to ‘awake and alert’.

A larger group arrived with a music teacher and a “Sorry John, I hope we don’t disturb you, we will be next door experimenting with instruments the kids have made from veggies.”

One cheerful lad paused to show him an instrument that looked vaguely like a recorder: “Hi John, I made it from this carrot I grew at home.”

... John Marsden’s thinking neatly demonstrated.