



Currumbena Ex-Students Survey: A Brief Report

Between May and September 1995 students of my third-year survey research unit at Macquarie University contacted ex-students of Currumbena School to find out how their lives had been influenced by their years at Currumbena. I began the year-long unit by presenting this general topic to the 21 students in my group. To foster a valid learning experience, I then allowed them to decide the specific content and wording of questions and the methodology to be used, so it was truly a group effort, with all the comradeship and pitfalls that entails. The pilot study involved 33 ex-students who completed questionnaires in the presence of a Macquarie student so that ambiguities could be clarified and feedback about wording could be obtained. An additional 48 ex-students responded to the 114 postal questionnaires in the main study. The following results are based on the 64 questionnaires which were available for analysis.

The sample comprised 26 males and 37 females (one did not indicate gender) aged between 14 and 33 (average = 23.8) who had spent from 1 to 11 years at Currumbena- (average = 4.8). Nearly 83% attended Currumbena for only part of their primary education, while over 17% spent all of it there. By mid-1995 19% had married, 59% were single, and 15% were in a de facto relationship; 13% were parents. For 20% their highest qualification was the school certificate; for 24% it was the HSC, and 35% had an undergraduate degree or higher. Of those with tertiary training, fine arts followed by arts and behavioural sciences were the most popular areas of study. Most respondents (39) were still studying, with business and arts/behavioural sciences equally most popular. Though a majority had lived in Lane Cove, Hunters Hill, or Ryde municipalities while attending Currumbena, only 19% did so now, with the inner city and inner west of Sydney and southern NSW/ACT accounting for a further 39%. Indeed, Currumbena ex-students are living in Germany, Honduras, the UK, and the USA and further afield.

What was their overall impression of Currumbena? A strong vote of confidence resulted: 55 reported liking Currumbena, 8 were neutral, and none disliked it. Similarly, 43 said that they would send their children to an alternative school like Currumbena, 11 would not, and 9 were uncertain. When asked about differences between Currumbena and other schools, ex-students mentioned (about equally) positive teacher-student relations, a comfortable atmosphere, respect between teachers and students, less stringent discipline, and general positive evaluations. These responses tie in well with Currumbena's stated objectives.

When asked how Currumbena students differed from others, they were regarded (in descending order) as - being socially skilled, unconventional, and selfdisciplined/assertive; only 7 thought Currumbena students were socially dysfunctional. Nearly all (57) agreed that their individuality as a child had been respected while at Currumbena; and strong majorities believed that while there they had been encouraged to be self-reliant, cooperation was more important than competition, motivation to learn was internal and not external, they actively participated in the running of the school, and they developed a love of learning.- Majorities disagreed that there was too much emphasis on creativity or too much freedom, though 29% thought there was too much freedom. Opinion was more evenly divided on whether they missed playing competitive sport while at Currumbena, with 38% agreeing and 56% disagreeing.

Nearly half (48%) attended a state high school after Currumbena, 23% an alternative independent high school, 16% a private high school, and 8% a state selective high school. Slightly more than half thought that they had had more difficulty adjusting to high school than non-Currumbena students, 17% thought they had had less, and 27% were neutral. In responses to open-ended questions, feeling that they were academically behind and problems with discipline were the greatest academic difficulties, and feelings of being a social or cultural outsider and a lack of individuality in high school were the greatest social difficulties. On the other hand, being independent, self-reliant and a good communicator were seen as assets acquired at Currumbena.

Open-ended questions asked how Currambena had influenced their relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Relations with parents benefited from open communication, closeness, friendship, and respect, though the most common response was "no difference". Relations with teachers benefited from equality, friendship, respect, and appreciation. Relations with peers benefited from the social skills, respect, appreciation, and cooperation learnt at Currambena.

As for general attitudes, majorities said they would rather spend time with people than alone, were confident interacting with people of all ages, enjoyed being a member of a team, were an organised person, were a confident public speaker, spoke out when they disagreed with others, met deadlines, were a happy person most of the time, could learn to do almost anything, kept promises even when it disadvantaged them, saw it as important to make the world a better place, and got satisfaction from a job well done. Majorities also disagreed that they had a high regard for authority, that they disliked community activities, disliked making decisions, were upset if others disagreed with their ideas, that goal setting was a waste of time, that getting what they want is more important than telling the truth, that if someone hurt them, it was okay to pay them back, that winning was more important than fair play, that when they wanted something, they sat around wishing they could have it, that they had no control over their future, and that if they didn't have to, they would never work.

Ex-students took part in an average of over 5 leisure activities, with individual sports, socialising and home leisure the leading activities. Over 30% had held leadership roles in high school, and over 20% in community organisations. As measured by a well respected scale, self-esteem was high, with ex-students averaging nearly 42 on a possible 10 (low self-esteem) to 50 (high) scale.

Every research study has limitations. Despite assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, which have been adhered to strictly, some respondents may have (even unconsciously) tailored some answers so as to appear socially desirable; this occurs in all surveys. It would have been useful to have a comparison group of similar age who had attended other primary schools, but this was ruled out by the Macquarie group as being too difficult. The response rate in the main study, slightly below 50%, was low but about average for posted questionnaires; due to anonymity it was impossible to pursue those who did not return their forms. Hence, we do not know whether those who did not respond have similar views.

Overall, this is a picture of largely happy, responsible, high-achieving young people who generally regard their Currambena experience with great affection and appreciation. Transition to high school has emerged as a particular concern. These results are being made available to Currambena School Council, who will seriously consider introducing changes in line with your comments. Remember that the continued success of Currambena depends on your continuing involvement. Thank you for your time, effort, and thoughts.

John Cunningham - then senior lecturer in Psychology (and father of 2 Currambena children)
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