ASPIRING TO BE THE MAGIC KINGDOM

Richard Gerver is a well-known speaker, author and a former headteacher. He remembers how, on his first day as a new head, a sprinkling of fairy dust became the catalyst for incredible change.

I remember the day I was appointed headteacher of Grange Primary School, a large, struggling primary school in Long Eaton, UK. The 500-place school had been under a cloud for the best part of a decade; poor results, high staff absence and low-level behaviour issues were the norm.

Prior to my appointment, there had been no permanent headteacher in place for nearly two years, because the previous one had been off through ill health.

It was not a happy place, but it had enormous potential. The school had a real sense of community and some great staff and fantastic kids, but was in a deep hole.

The shock of realities

My first day will live long in the memory. I arrived early and laden, rather like a new pupil, with a new pencil case and a smart new suit. Unlike a new pupil, I also carried my very own posh cafetière, which my wife had bought me as a present for getting the job.

I floated into my office and spent a little while "making it mine". I adjusted the furniture, rearranged the files, hung a few pictures and brewed a coffee. I put on some music, Einaudi piano music I think, and smiled. Wow, I thought, I am actually a head.

However, by 8am, reality was beginning to hit; a succession of people asking questions that they expected me to be able to answer, problems presented to me like gifts, and I was bombarded with information.

By 9am, many of the kids had swept past me into their classrooms with an air unique to children who are used to seeing a succession of heads. The cherry on the cake came at 9:45am when one of the school's governors who had appointed me came in to my office.

She poured herself a coffee, sat down and told me that, as head, I would now be in charge of scattering her ashes on the school site after her passing. It turned out that she had been one of the first pupils through the door when the school had opened in the late 1930s.

By lunchtime, I had begun to feel the creep of imposter syndrome. My then local authority adviser had come in to go through with me, in detail, exactly what was wrong with the school, its budgetary and staffing problems, and its very poor pupil data.

Visions of Disneyland

As the clock clicked around to 3:45pm and my first staff meeting, I confess that I was a little dazed; my new suit was already creased and at least two of my new pencils had been chewed through.

I walked into the staffroom to be met by a sea of faces, full of expectation tinged with cynicism. I had intended to start with Churchillian "fight them on the beaches" stirring oratory, but my mind went blank in front of these worn and exhausted people.

What did finally come out of my mouth had not been deeply thought through or really planned. I asked them all this: "How can we turn our school into somewhere as exciting as Disneyland?"

There were a few sniggers. In one corner, I promise you that money was changing hands, as part of the sweepstake on how long I'd last. People did start talking though, and by the end of the meeting there was a little stream of positivity.

When I look back on it now, I realise just how important that question had been for kickstarting the incredible seven-year journey that followed.

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Over that time, the school flew; mainly because the kids and the staff made it fly. It was described some years later by a visiting group of heads from Australia as the happiest school on earth.

The school achieved so much over those years but it definitely was catalysed by what happened after the Disney question. We agreed that schools couldn't be all smiles and rainbows and, actually, neither was Disneyland. A trip there is riddled with "tough stuff"; queues and challenging weather for example, but it is a place that most children and many adults find magical. A place where people are prepared to endure the tough stuff because of the moments of real joy.

Living, learning, laughing – forging a new environment

We all know that learning isn't easy – it's hard, and at times requires real self-discipline, resilience and trust. But, if we could unpick and translate what Disney does to create such a positive environment, we might just be onto something…that is really where our journey began. It's where our school vision came from.

Three words – 'Living, Learning, Laughing' – went on to drive and define our learning environment; everything we did had to demonstrate those three things and we started with the physical spaces.

In the first few weeks we talked to the children about the sensory spaces around them; the look of the place; the colour of the walls; the sounds; even the smells.

These are things that Disney are masters of – if people have to queue then use colour, sound and smell to make it part of the immersive experience.

We did the same. By the end of my first half term, the entire feel of the place had changed.

We had painted a few walls, introduced some music and some room fragrance, which meant that children, staff and even parents were talking about transformation with a spring in their steps and a smile on their faces.

We focused a huge amount of time and resources on room design and layout, and the school library was totally overhauled to make it child-friendly rather than adult-owned.

The same was true of the classrooms and public spaces. There were bright colours and furniture – and we used natural light where possible. We used coloured glass to create stimulating spaces. Of course, the real transformation of learning and attainment was going to take longer, but we had sprinkled some fairy dust that led to a momentum shift that was genuinely magical.

We went on to build a radio and TV studio, museum, café and shops – all run by pupils – so we could build a curriculum based around the school as a model "town". These innovative approaches made the school well known and we had many visitors keen to look at how we were making learning relevant and fun for our students.

For all the angst and pressure that teachers and heads are under, I urge them to remember that it's sometimes the simple things that get forgotten in the stream of new policies, systems and structures.

The physical and sensory environments can often drive schools forwards – they are tangible and immediate. In Walt Disney's own words: it's amazing what a little magic can do. ■

Richard Gerver is author of the international bestselling books, Simple Thinking *and* Change: Learn to Love It, Learn to Lead It. *He is now regarded as one of the world's most original and authentic thinkers around human leadership and organisational transformation.*

“A REALLY JOYFUL CHILDREN’S ENVIRONMENT WITH GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR EXPRESSION, MOVEMENT AND LEARNING”