

# Professionally Developing Teachers or Teachers Developing Professionally?

A Narrative Inquiry into the Professional Development  
Experiences of Three Primary School Teachers in  
North Queensland.

Thesis submitted by

Christine Margot Mensinga-Payard  
BEd (Hons); MEd Studies  
in April 2007

In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Education,  
James Cook University

## **DEDICATION**

**Remembering and honouring**

**Daniel John Payard**

**29-07-1960 to 01-09-2006**

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I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education.

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## **STATEMENT ON CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS**

The research presented and reported in this thesis was completed with stipend support from a James Cook University School of Education Postgraduate Research Scholarship. Further support by others is acknowledged overleaf.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I began this amazing journey six years ago. It has been a long personal and professionally challenging one made easier by those who have watched and supported me along the way. They deserve considerable credit and acknowledgement because, without them, I know I would not have completed this exploration of my academic and personal capabilities.

I must first thank the teachers who participated in my research. Ruby, Molly and Toni, you were willing participants who not only gave freely of your time for my research, but also provided me with incredibly rich and fascinating data, simply by being open with me about your experiences. Thank you for your trust in me as a professional. I hope the research text I have produced as a result of our conversations serves to encourage all three of you in your professional pursuits. I, and indeed those that read your stories, have and will learn much from your experiences. Thanks for sharing them with us.

Thank you also to Adam for allowing me to undertake this study in your school. To allow a stranger into a school to establish relationships with teachers and discuss potentially contentious issues takes courage and a strong belief in the value of educational research. I appreciate the faith you had in me as a professional and your candour in our discussions. I hope this material is useful to you in your role as a principal and leader of teachers.

Thanks to Mark and Jane—the information you provided to me in our interviews helped contextualise the research. I gained valuable insight into the history of the school and relationships on the Greenway landscape through our discussions. The material I gained from you both is so rich I can think of many more research documents and texts that can flow from them. Hopefully, at some stage in my research and writing career, I will be able to do you both justice.

Next, a huge thanks to Mary Klein, my principal supervisor. Mary, your constant and unfailing belief in me as a writer, sound thinker and professional made sure that I could not take the easy way out—not completing this epic journey. It also ensured that I stayed true not just to the methodology and my faith in it as a workable process, but that I kept the whole process and endeavour in perspective—it was a part of my life, not the whole of my life. Thanks for helping me keep the balance and thereby helping me reach the end. Your wisdom, practicality and empathy are inspirational.

Barry, my second supervisor, thank you for your continued encouragement and for challenging my thoughts. The crucible—you put me under pressure and made sure I could support my decisions in a professionally acceptable way. Thanks also to you and Betty for your meticulous attention to the little things that I could have so easily overlooked!

Kylie, Melissa, Tom, Tim (and other Innisfail Optical staff who have drifted in and out over the last few years)—thanks. Running a business, a family and studying fulltime are challenging in most cases, probably ludicrous endeavours when done together let alone with the other challenges I have had added into my experiences. I could not have finished this without your support in the busy practice and, Kylie, without your insistence that I pursue my dream, not Dan's business. Thanks for your patience and support in helping me realise, in a very practical way, that in life it is probably best to do what you do best.

Jo, my sister, my best critical and personal friend and perhaps my biggest fan who kept encouraging me to believe in myself and the work I was doing, thank you. You've paved the way with your own work and dilemmas in study and have helped me to come to terms with both my academic and personal challenges. It's great to have such a wonderful travelling companion who can tolerate my tantrums, help me to laugh at myself and ensure that I stay true to the journey and the process. Thanks for helping me stay grounded and realistic.

Graham (my brother-in-law)—you didn't really know what you were getting into when you joined this clan, did you? I'm pleased you did. Thanks for the words of wisdom and helping me realise I could and should finish this.

Janet and Wiert Mensinga (Mum and Dad). Thanks for teaching me to love learning. Thanks for teaching me to believe in myself and what I do. Above all, thanks for your support, love and encouragement throughout my life, not just this trip.

Damien and Tim (my children). Whoever said a PhD was a lonely pursuit did not know how this family works in the face of challenges. Thanks for the encouragement, belief in me and the candid remarks including: "Just get on with it," "Of course you'll have to redo it! What do you expect if you rush something? Take your time and do it well Mum!" and "Are we going to be at Uni together while you finish this PhD?" I hope my venture into this realm of academia has not put you off, but has encouraged you to realise that you too can achieve mammoth and sometimes insurmountable tasks by plodding along, one step at a time, paying attention to detail and keeping an eye on the ultimate goal at the end of it all.

Daniel, my husband and partner in many things, you knew, perhaps more than me, that once I started this I would work towards finishing it. You made me promise I would complete it no matter what your health outcomes were. Well, I am here. Thanks for sticking with me pretty much all the way through. Our story as a family and as a couple has helped me realise the importance of the well balanced, all round person I want to be. Thanks for the ongoing love and life experiences you provided in our time together.

## **ABSTRACT**

Professional development for teachers has long been seen as a major way in which student learning outcomes can be improved and as a way in which new educational practices can be instituted within the education system. Education Queensland policy documents, statements and reports indicate a concerted effort needs to be made in Queensland to ensure that change practices yield successful and consistent results across the state in order to provide quality educational outcomes for all Queensland students. However, considerable research has demonstrated that reform strategies and change practices often yield mixed results in terms of effectiveness. According to a wide body of research, the most effective form of educational change requires the participation of teachers not only as receptors and conduits of reform, but as determiners and mediators of change. So, what really happens in the professional development of our teachers, particularly in regional Queensland?

This research project describes professional development experiences of three primary school teachers in a regional setting in 2001/2002 using a narrative inquiry approach described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The narratives of these participants indicate that professional development is an individual experiential process that is ongoing and occurring within a complex professional landscape incorporating biographical, social, historical and systemic contexts of operation. Teachers' professional development is integrally associated with stories of identity over time and incorporates negotiated relationships with others who share the educational landscape they inhabit. This narrative inquiry includes not only the participants' perspectives of their experiences, but also mine as a researcher using a narrative inquiry process. The reader is invited to view teachers developing professionally from the individual's perspective and consider the value of such perspectives when considering teachers' professional growth within our schools.

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## **PRELUDE TO THIS THESIS EXPERIENCE**

15<sup>th</sup> May, 2006

Dear Reader,

Welcome to a narrative account of a research experience exploring professional development experiences of three primary school teachers in a regional school in Far North Queensland. This research story has taken almost six years to conduct and record as some major life experiences coincided with my academic endeavours. This story has a uniqueness that pertains specifically to me as the inquirer and author. I begin, therefore, with a brief account of several features of the document so that you, as a reader, can be prepared for the account of research experience you are about to encounter. Included are some expectations that I hold for you and your role as a reader. Whilst I cannot prescribe nor predict your reactions to this document, I can tell you a little of how I see our relationship as author and reader during this shared part of my research journey, and warn you about what you can expect from the experience before we begin. Perhaps you can view this section as the preliminary “spiel” that a tour guide may provide before embarking on an adventure.

This narrative inquiry presents the story of a research experience that began in 2000. The research text that you are reading is one representation of that experience. It incorporates a number of different styles/genres of writing that I feel best represent the purpose and intent of my research project and the method of research that I selected. A fundamental premise of mine and many other narrative and naturalistic inquirers, including Dewey (1938), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Polkinghorne (1988), McAdams (1993) and others, is that the human experience of life is shared, presented and often reconstructed and represented through stories. Those stories take the form and shape of many different genres and styles including personal letters, comic renditions and jokes, dramatic plays or serialised dramas, journal articles, novels, news stories and among others, formal positivist thesis structures. Experience, as recorded in these various genres, is, nonetheless, storied.

The structure of this thesis demonstrates the inquiry and storied nature of experience that I sought to investigate. It is not a linear construction or replication of the sequence in which the research occurred although parts of it may appear to be sequentially ordered. The table of contents provides you with the outline and sequential presentation of the research text that is fundamentally designed to provide contextual information before providing detailed accounts of the narrative experiences I investigated.

There are two parallel themes presented in this text: my development professionally as a researcher, and an account of the narratives of experience of the teachers in my study. Narrative inquiry is considered to be both phenomenon and method (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and this thesis demonstrates that concept. In many ways, it is as much a story about my research journey and learning about narrative inquiry, as it is a story of the experiences of the participants. Whilst occurring concurrently in time throughout the research process, the concepts are not portrayed simultaneously in the research text, yet one could not be learnt without the other.

Chapter 1 is designed to provide you with an understanding of the context of the research project by including a discussion of my own personal background and history that led to the research inquiry topic. This is done primarily through the use of an autobiographical journal entry that introduces me as a major participant and character in the narrative inquiry described in this text.

Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the research and documentation that existed at the beginning of my inquiry and that helped refine and focus my attention on what I considered was missing in the educational research at the time. I am aware that much research has been produced and added to the field during the period of my research project that could be included in a discussion about professional development and teachers, but to include that in this section would be an inaccurate representation of the research context that I entered in 2000/2001. References to

more recent research and theory are integrated into the chapters following the narrative presentation of the participants' accounts of their professional development experiences.

Chapter 3 is essentially a broad presentation of narrative inquiry concepts and fundamental tenets that place this method of study in the broader context of educational and social science research and that demonstrates why I selected it as a research method. It portrays the aspects of narrative inquiry and research that I believe reflect the complexity of human experience and that I endeavour to capture in this thesis.

Chapter 4 offers a narrative account of the experiences I had in conducting this narrative inquiry. It presents the dilemmas, challenges and rationale behind many research decisions. It illustrates the application of the narrative inquiry tenets and principles outlined in Chapter 3. A different narrative inquiry would present different challenges and relationships to negotiate with different rationales and decisions having to be made. Chapter 4 demonstrates why narrative inquiry cannot be reduced to a formulaic method of research. Chapter 4 also provides some contextual information about the narrative accounts that occur in the following four chapters. It positions the accounts in the research text and provides some crucial contextual details – as Phillion (2002) would suggest, it helps to introduce the inquiry landscape and the narratives I have constructed.

Chapter 5 comprises two short stories that lead you into the physical and social landscape of Greenway State Primary School, the site of my research. I introduce the narrative genres I selected for this chapter and provide reasons for my choice before 'opening the gates' of Greenway State Primary School for you.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are the series of letters I wrote as narrative accounts of experiences the teacher participants provided me. These are the essence and focus of my research and what I consider the "juiciest" parts of the research text. These are the stories of experience I was

looking for. The letters do not have an introductory commentary; that would detract from the stories. At this point in the research text I will have probably spoken enough and I allow you to hear the voices of the people with whom I worked so closely.

Chapters 9 and 10 draw together many of the issues I started to identify about professional development through the stories of my participant teachers. They include my reflections on the issues of professional development that arose during my study and draw in aspects of research from many sectors that I believe are relevant when considering teachers' professional development. Current literature and other narrative studies I read and referred to during my research journey are referenced in these chapters. In essence, these chapters draw together the narrative inquiry process as a past event and represent my current view and story of professional development now. They also pose further questions for the future including considerations of the social and physical contexts in which our teachers operate, the relationships that impact on their experience and the history and future of education in Queensland and, perhaps more specifically, in a regional centre.

Reader, throughout this thesis you will note that I discuss and reflect on my role as a research participant and I deliberately include references to my responses to the stories presented by the other participants. I believe my role in this research is characterised by subjective responses and I do my best to identify them as such. I reacted to the stories and incidents relayed to me as I was reminded of many aspects of education and personal experience I considered relevant. You, as a reader, are likely to also find yourself interacting with the stories and resonating with aspects of the narratives provided by all of the research participants. In fact, I consider that you too are a participant. I am reminded of a radio interview in which Jon Cleary, the novelist, referred to a statement by Graham Greene: "There are only two people involved in a book: the reader and the writer" (2003). How you respond and resonate with the stories of experience provided here will depend on your stories of experience.

I invite you then, to begin this adventure tour with me and enjoy the stories and opportunities it presents to you in considering the question of three teachers' professional development experiences in a regional Queensland primary school and the inquiry that brought these to your attention.

Regards,  
Chris.