

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

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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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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.

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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

15th 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.