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TITLE: Storm Surge: An Autoethnography about Teaching in the Australian Outback

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Abstract

This is a story about what happens when an experienced teacher attempts to survive the implementation of a relentless, assessment-driven curriculum. Australian Education systems are now demanding that schools be accountable for student results, and that student outcomes are measured. Philosophically, this may have a certain merit, but in translation, as systemic doctrines are interpreted and implemented independently, school by school, one teacher grieves for the loss of student-centred learning and intrinsic motivation in the classroom. The pedagogy is geared away from engagement, and towards statistical endorsement of each school's teaching and learning. As with most statistical experiments, the individual exceptions are less important than the general trends. Ruth, a teacher in a remote Australian school, sees the system devouring her children.

An Autoethnography about Teaching in Outback Australia

A cyclone of change hit Australian schools last year. The new National Curriculum was implemented, and with it came state government mandates to ensure that teachers integrate specific curriculum content into classroom teaching. Just prior to this was the *National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)*. Students are now tested and teachers are pressured to teach to a standardised test. Schools are teaching for the NAPLAN test. And I am within.

I am one of thousands of teachers in my state, printing off five-week units, at sixty-eight or more pages each, for prescribed Maths, English and Science subject content. We worry. The generic context of the content is not relevant to our rural and remote students. It disengages them. Concerns are expressed about rigid unit designs. I worry about the new acronym to describe kinaesthetic activities like Sport, Drama and Art – *TWAs* (Time Wasting Activities).

It is from within this climate, that I approach my state government's Department of Education, and ask them to participate in my research into teachers' well-being and student learning. They refuse. They tell me that my study would identify them – so why should they hide? But I am not easily silenced.

The story is universal and perennial anyway. It's about balancing adequate pedagogy with the scramble to win the national school testing competitions. The purpose of the game becomes lost in the bid to win. Careers depend on it and children are crushed in the rush. There is something wrong here, and the irony is that I can't get ethical approval to investigate an unfair situation in schools. All seems lost – until I discover Autoethnography. This research methodology, which allows for first-person inquiry into the researcher's own experience of a given phenomenon, will allow me to openly tell it as I see it. Because I am not involving co-researchers, I do not need ethical approval - the thirty-six page indemnification against possible loss, damage, or liability.

I learn from Carolyn Ellis (2004) that Autoethnography is based on stories, and that stories are constructs that allow people to make sense of their worlds and their lives. Autoethnography uses the self as a lens to understand a wider culture and in turn uses the experiences of others to better understand the self (Ballaam, M. 2011). Auto ethnography gives me licence to write my story, my

thoughts and feelings, as I encounter change in expectations, change in leadership style, and change in my self-confidence as an experienced teacher. I am within, and from here I write. I am at a school, somewhere in the tropics, but I could be any one of many teachers, anywhere in Australia right now.

.....

The end of school holidays looms...it is time to start to prepare for the coming term. I follow my usual ritual. I set aside three days. I pull out curriculum documents. These have changed over time but are not too hard to navigate. It's always about Learning Outcomes. I lay them over my long wooden dining table where they stay open in no particular order. They are my mindmap.

Maths, English, Study of Society, Science, Art, Technology as well as Health and Physical Education.

I ruffle through paper work to find the list of names of my students. There they are: Mitchell , who is always digging in the dirt, excavating and examining rocks and artefacts; Zack, who finds reading really difficult but has an excellent memory and loves to be involved in a project; Archie, an impetuous kid; Amy, a deep thinker...twenty-nine individuals.

I create a calendar. In it I place any special days- Mother's Day, Show Holidays, Environment Week, Sports days. I add two well-worn, dog eared documents to this mix- an A3 sheet containing a matrix of learning styles (thanks to Howard Gardner) and a *Productive Pedagogy* booklet.

The pondering, the contemplating begins - the juggle...checking ... more thinking... something to eat ... reading through papers, dreaming, imagining, predicting...

To an observer, it might not look like I am doing much; the pulling together of information, the matching of this to students' interests, ways of learning, moulding around the constraints of the day and expectations. I draw on my knowledge of child development, on my knowledge of the way they learn, on my reading, on my professional development, on my experience. I shape and combine the content and teaching strategies...the pedagogy. This assemblage is a work of art. Each dip of the

brush colours the canvas. It represents the many hues, the many pigments that are available. It is a work specific to the audience, those students for which it is created specifically.

A long process but I conceptualise where I am going with these students. It becomes part of me...I know it. I can live it.

I rampage through my resource library, spend far too many hours finding related resources on the internet and frequently get side-tracked. The table is now piled high, books lie open, 'posts its' in yellow, pink, green and blue mark pages and identify priorities. Empty coffee cups, like my visions, balance precariously in conglomeration.

Over three days a shape emerges, but is quickly re-moulded. The reigning in of my creation into curriculum-speak - into a linear and prescribed communication schema is confining, but it is done.

.....

It has been a great day shopping today...the weather was perfect. I did not spend too much money.

It is almost seven as I drive in through the gate. Turbo the dog is here to greet me, tail wagging. All is good.

Wednesday - mail day out here in the bush. I best check to see if there is anything important. Torch in hand I wander to the post box feeling the cool evening air against my skin. The sky is bright with stars that are only visible out here, away the city lights. I pull at the bundle of mail secured together with a rubber band. It falls heavily from the mailbox, which was made by my youngest son some years ago.

It looks like Readers' Digest paraphernalia. I flick through the envelopes as I come near to the light of the house. I feel a churn in my stomach and adrenaline alerts my body as I see the government Education Department logo.

I say out loud 'So what do they want now?' and sigh. I fill my lungs as if to sustain my being. I rip open the letter. One page and a self-addressed envelope fall on the table. I fold open the page still in my

hand. My eyes scan the page with no real focus. My breathing changes, my stomach and upper body feels jumpy. I have to force myself to read from the beginning.

Official notification that my research approval has been rejected. Big brother wants no bugs on him. I knew this was coming yet it annoys me so much. I start to argue in my head against the reasons they have given. They do not wish to be identified.

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The National Assessment Program for Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) was introduced into Australian schools in 2008:

First implemented in 2008, NAPLAN entails yearly standardised testing of students in Years 3, 5, 7, 9. Performances on these tests are compared with like school comparisons. Since 2010, these comparisons have been recorded on the website MySchool. Results in NAPLAN have quickly become high stakes (Lingard, 2010, Luke, 2011)

I vowed I would not get caught up into all this NAPLAN stuff, but here I am three weeks before the dreaded May week, practise testing each day. I am mortified to say that it is becoming a bit of a management strategy:

‘If you don’t listen you won’t be able to do this on your NAPLAN test. I am sure it will be there. It has been every year.’

I have added to my work load as I have to mark these papers so the kids can see where they went wrong. Are they really listening? Listening. .Listening. Is that what learning has reverted to? The boys are becoming increasingly restless. How long is it since we have had fun?

I am feeling increasingly anxious. My cough is getting worst. At night I wake teaching a lesson.

Panic -There are not enough days left to cover everything. There are not enough hours in the day. I cannot hold their attention.

On the morning of the test I am not sure who is more nervous, the kids or me.

Then in a time lapse, it is all over. I float.

My mind is clearer, I start to think ahead. Now let's get on with learning!

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As a consequence of school NAPLAN performance, recorded on ACARA's MySchool website, a school's individual excellence within a particular community is now ignored. Schools are now set in competition against one another both for clients and outcomes, employing market principles to education (Phelm, 2010; Lingard, 2010). Students are no longer the focus of these tests. Now it is about measuring the performances of teachers and schools. Results outweigh student understanding and independence (Martin, 2007).

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It is the first week of the school year. The staff has been instructed to copy last year's NAPLAN tests and administer them to the new grades. I must take the test administered to year five last May and now give it to a new lot of students who have just entered the school year. I am informed that this has been mandated by the District Director. We are to mark and collate the results and send them on to the Principal.

I do not feel comfortable. I have never really been asked to do something like this before.

The year five kids look so young and innocent. One of them, Ali, really cannot read at all. She has missed so much school. Oh, she has amazing knowledge. She has lived with her mum up the Cape. She has tended the garden with her grandma, observed the wild life in its natural environment. She can fashion material into amazing art works. Reading has not really been a priority in her world.

I give the test as instructed. Most of them struggle ...they stoop over the paper, struggling, raising their hand in search for some assistance, some understanding at what these words, sentences are directing them to do.

I feel so guilty. I am ashamed that I have forced anguish on them. To date, this is the worst thing I have ever done to a child in my teaching career.

I hand the papers to the Principal.

I state quietly, 'That is the worst thing I have ever done as a teacher.'

She meets my eyes briefly but says nothing.

I wait for the results. I know I will be pleased if they do well. But why? I don't believe in all this. I even have parents say they don't care about it. Why has it become important me? Am I looking for something to validate my worth as a teacher? I am ashamed.

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The Melbourne Declaration (2008, p. 6-7) made an allegiance 'to support all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens... and to promote equity and excellence in education.' In so doing an Australian Curriculum would be developed that 'will equip all young Australians with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in a globalised world and information rich workplaces of the current century' (National Declaration on National Goals for Young Australians, p.4-5). This curriculum would be accessible to all young Australians, regardless of their social or economic background or the school they attend. This Education Revolution (Coorey,2007), as it became referred to, resulted in the creation of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). This body was given the responsibility to manage national curriculum, testing and accountability.

Jackson

Jackson is a twin. The first born. Academically Jackson lags significantly behind his sibling and class peers. Jackson reads at a very basic level. He will not be able to read the NAPLAN material. I feel

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compromised, expecting Jackson to take the NAPLAN tests. The Principal and I arrange a meeting with his mum. From her view point if she withdraws Jackson from the testing then the other twin should also be withdrawn.

We try to ease the burden on Jackson by telling him to just fill in one bubble for each answer.

I can hardly read his writing task response. Nothing I can do. I did what I could. I am confident that Jackson's mum knows there is a major learning difficulty here. We have talked often about this.

NAPLAN results return. Jackson's results indicate he is at national mean level.

One random response out of five are pretty good odds!

On receiving his results, Jackson's mum comments. 'It's good that we allowed him to do the test. He is doing better than we thought.'

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My compounding feelings of frustration seem justified as I read over the literature review for my autoethnography. This is what sustains me, keeps me sane. But I am becoming increasingly cynical of the system, of my employer.

Should this be so? I question myself.

Where do I stand in respect to Code of Conduct?

Do I have to be a robot to work in this system?

Others have the same thoughts:

...teachers may lose the freedom to devise and design the best lessons, activities and resources for an individual set of students if there is a requirement to use *Curriculum into the Classroom material*. This would be most inappropriate and would constitute a serious reduction in the legitimate scope for teachers to exercise professional judgment and expertise.

A move such as this would surely have the effect of deprofessionalising teachers in state schools (The Queensland English Teachers Association, 2011. p1).

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I stand at the sink of the staffroom, tears rolling down my cheeks, my chest heaving, the bottom of my stomach feeling like it was going to drop out. Everything that I believe in... everything that I stand for... my identity in despair. Everything I believe in is being trashed.

All we have heard for the last five weeks is “*explicit teaching.... direct instruction.... warm ups.... consolidations.... WATS WILT....SMBs....timetables.... data....*

A glossary is needed;

WALT - we are learning to...

WILT - what I am looking for...

SMBs – show me boards

My mind will not turn off. I am arguing with myself- justifying my position.

One staff member goes off on stress at week four.

I need to regain some sort of equilibrium.... Have I missed something?

Have I been left behind?

Am I out of date in my practice? I am sickened.

Looking for something to hold on to I click on to the Education Department Website.

I scan the site for where previously it stated the *WHAT* stuff.

Surprise (or is it really) the site has changed...there is now plenty about the *HOW*.

Five Pedagogical Methods are provided from which schools, through “community consultation”, can choose to develop their school Pedagogical Framework. And so instead of reading my novel over the weekend I read through all these frame works.

It is interesting, but I constantly wonder why we have to be compartmentalised into a particular ‘way’ of teaching. Surly there are times or situations where as a professional, I should be able to select what is appropriate at that point in time, for that particular child. I always thought teaching was a profession. I reflect on other professions. I wonder if they too have frame works and limitations. Of course we all must work within an ethical framework, but are they told how they must diagnose and treat their clients?

What do I do with all the knowledge that I have gained over thirty years of teaching? Why then am I called an *Experienced Senior Teacher* if my understanding of teaching is now redundant?

But there is hope. There is a choice to be made together, as a school. The conversation is yet to be shared...

.....

She sails into our classroom. A ‘walk through’ this morning -clip board in hand, checking that I am following the obligatory procedures, have all the required posters on the walls, using the desired resources...

I have spent hours trying to balance my plan for the week... putting all the pieces of the jigsaw together.

It’s Monday morning and I only have the class for one hour before they go to music. It is the beginning of a new unit ... I want to introduce the new unit now so I can use the teacher aide time the next day. These kids have ‘done’ persuasive text work each year... I need to find out what they already know. Experience tells me this group do not listen well on a Monday morning so I have to get them busy. Ideally six groups would optimise the ‘hot potatoes’ I have planned. This strategy will allow me to ascertain the knowledge of persuasive language features, test structures and purpose by the collective group.

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A parent arrives to see me at 8.50am. I do not have time to organise the room to accommodate six groups. Five will have to do. The groups are a bit big, but that's just what happens at times.

I have been ignoring her.

"This is a waste of time!" she says to me, as I attempt to involve a student in the group brainstorm.'

I turn and face her.

'What was that?'

'This is a waste of time. They should be at their desks using their white boards'.

I had zoned out during a staff meeting when the topic of small white boards was being discussed. I vaguely thought they must have been something for the lower grades. But when she said she had ordered some for my class I thought I better take note. The description of these boards and the manner in which they were to be used made me laugh out loud. All I could imagine were the old slates used in the eighteen hundreds and a student in the corner with a dunce's hat on his head.

This cannot be happening I muse.

.....

It is fortunate that I have an hour noncontact as I will need to breathe, breathe deep, breathe.

It's time to speak up...I need to feel strong.

11 am- I love my lunch. After my early morning start, I think it is my favourite meal.

This morning it is interrupted abruptly. She waltzes in and sits, back erect.

'People are just not doing what I have asked' she announces to the room.

Silence.

(Time to speak up Ruth.... Time to speak up...the voice in my head prompts.)

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I take a breath:

'Look I do not want to argue about this but there are aspects of what you are asking us to do that I have problems with.' I hedge.

'Well you have to do it. It's happening down south too (pause) "This is the expectation and if you do not want to go with it, you will just have to find somewhere else to work." And she continues:

"Look Robert is the only one who has a daily timetable up...'

I turn take another breath and wrinkle my brow in to an inquisitive frown.

'Yes I have!' I respond indigently.

'Look! This is the way it should be done!'

She hands me her iPhone to enable me to see the photo of the timetable.

I stand. I don't want to see it. This is becoming way too confronting. Never have I been challenged at this level.

'And' she continues 'no one has their program on the door so that parents can see what you are doing.'

Now this really hits a nerve. I can feel my feet. They are ready to run ...I can feel it... I must resist..

I am passionate about parent engagement. I go out of my way to involve parents. This is incredulous...being judged by the presence or absence of a piece of paper on the door.

And so I begin.

'If I want to talk to a parent I go out to the front of the school and talk to them. They know I am always available. I phone them from home, email or stop in them in the street. A piece of paper on the door is not going to make a difference.'

She continues 'You are not teaching explicitly.'

I am proud that I keep it together.

'The Hot Potato that I was using today is a legitimate teaching strategy.' I retort.

'Yes, yes. All that higher order thinking stuff - but you could have used the white boards. Not everybody was doing something. You are resisting change!"

I almost keep it together. I have had a successful teaching career. I have stayed in touch with current practices. I believe that I have made a difference. I have really engaged kids in learning.

'Ruth you have been teaching for a long time. It is hard to change.'

"But I don't want to change. I like what I am doing now."

I sound like a child. I cry.

I soon have to be back in the room ready to teach. I grab cold water and dab it on my eyes. The fridge is next to me so I scavenge in the freezer for some ice to pat around my face.

She is still talking on and on on and on. The thought of the kid - my students, help me regain balance.

I take a deep breath again and calmly state, 'I'm sorry, I have to get myself together so I can go back to the classroom.'

She continues.

I repeat it again.

I breathe deeply. ...somehow the ridiculousness of the note on the door gives me strength and I start to regain my composure.

.....

We have been instructed to use this spelling program. The teachers' books cost \$360 each. "It's easy" I am told. "You, just have to follow the script".

I open the book. Hold it in front of me and read - follow the script. I feel so stupid. I cannot believe I am taking part in this call and response interaction. I am having trouble stifling a giggle it feels so awkward. I turn from the kids and cover my face with the book.

The kids respond... 'This is weird Miss.

.....

Burnard and White, (2008) maintain that if we play it safe by following a preconceived format we will never make progress. Brilliance, they continue comes in your mistakes and the problem solving that occurs along the way to recovery.

Luke (2011) asserts that when curriculum is highly prescriptive, teacher professionalism is undermined. He contends that when the curriculum is so full that the task to unpack it is arduous, it is too easy to follow scripts that have been commercially developed, divorced from any connection to the student or context.

Hattie (2003) refers to the measures undertaken in the United States as so called 'idiot proof' solutions, where the proofing has been to restrain the idiots to tight scripts –tighter curricula specifications, prescribed textbooks bounded structures of the classroom, scripts of the teaching act and all this underpinned by the structure of accountability (p1).

I roll over, searching for the clock. There it is. 3.30 am. Same as yesterday, and the day before and the day before that. My mind goes to the day ahead. I start to give the lesson. My mind goes right through the process. The actual words are articulated. Spoken. This is what used to happen in my first year of teaching – thirty years ago.

.....

The ARD visits today. That is, the Assistant Regional Director. Like everything else, he has been depersonalised to a string of letters - an acronym. Each teacher has been allocated a time to be observed and have rooms inspected. We will be required to perform the obligatory 'warm up' and 'consolidation' tasks. The computer keeps pinging, and on investigation I see that it is actually alerting me of the number of minutes to his arrival at my room. I certainly did not set that up.

I warn the kids we are having an important visitor. I actually plead with them to please be good. I am not very good at 'playing the game'. I am not very good at pretending to endorse things that are disengaging for students, so usually I just say it how it is. The promise of Art or an outdoor game work pretty well these days as a bribe, since they are now considered TWA's. I did not know what a *TWA* was until a few weeks ago, when I learned from my new principal that Art, Sport, Games, Silent reading, Gardening, Computer games - basically anything other than Literacy and Numeracy, are TWAs - *Time Wasting Activities!*

All boxes are ticked, the necessary posters on the walls. Kids sitting straight, SMB ready to use, PowerPoint up - and he is late. I am marking time now...filling filling filling. The kids have lost their focus. They continually peer out the window. I'm losing them. I'm losing it. I give up - fed up with trying to fill, fed up with having to get cross with the kids as they are by now, almost hanging out the window for all to see! I call the administration and enquire what is happening. Oh yes, the ARD has just arrived. He is just going to have a talk with the Principal over some lunch and then he will be down....

No longer do I have the attention of ninety nine percent of the class and a 'Missss' sounds across the room. Ah! There they are - the ARD and Principal at the door. I glance at the time 1.26pm....four minutes before the lunch bell.

.....

Research in the United States indicates that many experienced teachers are leaving the profession. The impacts of prescribed curricula, state standards and dictatorial testing, regardless of the students' needs and the teacher's professional judgement, is atrophying. This research prompts concerns that

the nation's teaching force will be deskilled and replaceable by technicians who only need to carry out the plans that others have made (Benham Tye. Obrien).

.....

Another teacher has gone on stress leave. She too has been told that she is not teaching the 'right' way. I comfort her when she comes to me in tears. I wrap my arms around her as she sobs. She has been told that she is trying to cover too many subject areas. She should be just concentrating on Literacy and Numeracy. She is not keeping the kids on task. There is too much 'down time'. Thirty years of teaching and she has to work through her planning with the Principal. I have not seen her teach but I see desolation on her face.

I say, 'You have to be strong in what you believe about teaching. Go home and read whatever you can find about child development or teaching and learning. Draw strength from it, so that when you are questioned you can articulate – justify why you teach as you do.'

She just sobs. 'I have been teaching thirty years.'

.....

A synthesis of the research of learning, formulated by The International Academy of Education (IAE) identifies environments, practices and pedagogies that will allow children to learn. A scan of the reference list reveals names including Piaget, Gardner and Vygotski.

It says:

- Learning requires the active, constructive involvement of the learner.
- Learning is primarily a social activity and participation in the social life of the school is central for learning to occur.
- People learn best when they participate in activities that are perceived to be useful in real life and are culturally relevant.
- New knowledge is constructed on the basis of what is already understood and believed.

- People learn by employing effective and flexible strategies that help them to understand reason, memorize and solve problems.
- Learners must know how to plan and monitor their learning, how to set their own learning goals and how to correct errors.
- Sometimes prior knowledge can stand in the way of learning something new.
- Students must learn how to solve internal inconsistencies and restructure existing conceptions when necessary.
- Learning is better when material is organized around general principles and explanations, rather than when it is based on the memorization of isolated facts and procedures
- Learning becomes more meaningful when the lessons are applied to real-life situations.
- Learning is a complex cognitive activity that cannot be rushed. It requires considerable time and periods of practice to start building expertise in an area.
- Children learn best when their individual differences are taken into consideration.
- Learning is critically influenced by learner motivation. Teachers can help students become more motivated learners by their behaviour and the statements they make.'

(Vosniadou, S. 2001 p8)

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Dale

Dale is minimalist ...many boys seem to be that way especially when writing. Dale is not engaged in conventional classroom learning. He cannot really see the point. I had been given the opportunity to establish a garden at the school. While many events evolved from this prospect, Dale's story stands out.

Dale and a few of his peers identified that we needed a shed in the garden area to store tools and other garden equipment. I thus set them the task to find out sizes and costs of suitable sheds.

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Through a group discussion they identified suppliers of suitable sheds. We planned questions to be asked and details to be obtained over the next couple of days.

Time went on with teaching and learning, Maths and English as per the curriculum. In the middle of teaching I looked up to see Dale with his feet on the table next to him swinging back on a chair talking on the classroom phone. I enquired in somewhat disbelief.

'Dale what are you doing?' he waved at me to be quiet.

I stood puzzled. He hung up.

'Dale' I inquired, 'Who were you talking to?'

He replied informatively 'Richard in trade Miss.'

I gestured my confusion.

'Richard at Bunnings Miss. They are going to give us the shed for half price and they will deliver it free.'

Richard (in Trade) rang later that day to tell me what an amazing conversation he had had with Dale and how Dale had negotiated the price of the shed and its delivery. He was quizzical when I told him Dale was 11 years old.

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'The greatest sign of success for a teacher... is to be able to say, "The children are now working as if I did not exist.'

Maria Montesorri,

Italian Physician and Educator (1870-1952)

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