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**Telling stories:  
Sustaining improvement in schools  
operating under adverse conditions**

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## **Abstract**

We know what good schools look like but experience tells us that it is very difficult to create and maintain them, especially when they are operating under challenging circumstances - constant change, limited resources, high staff and student turnover, and a concentration of first time leaders and beginning teachers. The *Changing Schools in Changing Times Project 2005-7* was designed to investigate ways in which schools working under adverse conditions can engage in sustained school improvement. From the outset, the project team acknowledged that the *quid pro quo* of being given access to these types of heavily researched schools was the expectation that they would get something in return, and this was most often expressed in terms of some feedback on how they were going. Consequently, we had to find ways of working in and with the schools we were researching and, like them, we found it difficult to get people together in the same place without interruption for long enough to maintain a focus on what works and why it matters. Unremarkably, we started to write field notes, make classroom observations, take minutes of meetings and transcribe interviews, but we needed a way of supporting and documenting our observations and conversations that could be regularly and readily shared and negotiated with research participants. We started to scratch together short stories that drew on all our data sources, and shared them with each other and the research participants. The stories have come to function as both a product of the research and one of its data sources. They raise a number of questions related to their use and distribution, such as: Whose stories are they? In whose interest are they told? Do those depicted within them recognise themselves? These stories are described and discussed in this paper, and the roles they are playing in the research and reform processes are critically analysed.

*Our obligation is to come clean... [to] interrogate in our writings who we are as we coproduce the narratives we presume to 'collect'*

*Fine, Weiss, Weseen & Wong, 2000, p.123*

## **Introduction**

In schools operating under adverse conditions, teachers and school leaders can spend a considerable amount of time responding to challenging circumstances and have little time left over to think and plan for improvement. They can appear to 'do' lots of things for seemingly little gain. While some of these circumstances may be 'self-managed' and ameliorated through school-based reforms, others are beyond the influence of local responses. For example, a rural high school in a small to medium town in NSW, that will be called Country High School (HS), has a small core of local teachers, but most of the teachers are short-stays to earn transfer points for a more favourable appointment on the coast. The Deputy Principal described this challenge to the school as 'beginningness'. In one three year period, Country HS experienced over 60% staff turnover (42 of 69 positions), including three principals. In addition, teachers and leaders were generally first time appointments. At one time in this period, twenty of the thirty-one classroom teachers (65%) were within their first three years of appointment; six of the seven Head Teachers were within their first three years of appointment (the 7<sup>th</sup> was unfilled); and the two Deputy Principals were in their third year of appointment. While these problems at Country HS are specific, they are not unlike those at other 'hard-to-staff' schools.

Adverse conditions, such as these, work against slow steady progressions towards improvement that are more likely in more stable environments; they also emphasise on the spot problem solving (reflection-in-action) rather than shared description and analysis of problems that produce planned responses (reflection-on-action) (Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). In working with Country HS, and the three other schools in our study, we were challenged to develop ways of describing, recording and analysing these schools and the conditions they were operating within, while also supporting school-based colleagues as they attempted to undertake school improvement. As in cultures where oral traditions keep alive customs and practices through the generations, so too in schools where change is a constant, story and storytellers are needed to pass on what are considered to be the local and valued messages of teaching and learning. When this works, such a story enables teachers and communities to speak with an enduring voice to young people, to communities, and to each other, about the value and purpose of schooling and of learning. However, when these messages are lost or drowned out, what is valued is reflected in what we do and achieve, and when this is associated with failure the message is likely to be that teaching is hard and, despite our best efforts, students are unlikely to learn.

## **Background**

Prior to the commencement of the research described in this paper, I was an academic partner to Country HS. My position was funded through an equity program and was aimed at assisting the school initiate whole school improvement. In this capacity, and in response to the conditions described earlier, I wrote a story about Country HS:

*At our school there is one certainty: change...*

*We cannot assume that people, structures or conditions will stay the same. One way to accommodate these changes is to create a story that endures, and that we take responsibility for nurturing and passing on. The story of what works and why it matters here has the potential to become the stable core of our school. This is part of our oral tradition and our way of keeping alive our customs and practices; it enables us to speak with the one voice to young people, and to each other, about the value and purpose of schooling.*

*At the heart of this story is learning, not just for students but also for teachers and others associated with the school.*

*This story will be lost if it is not nurtured and maintained; it will become a secret if it is not shared; and it will become a fairy tale if it not reflected in what we do. It needs storytellers and they should be students, teachers, school leaders and members of the community.*

*In the last eighteen months, we've attempted to draw some separate storylines together to develop a shared understanding of our common purpose. This common purpose is reflected in the school's philosophy:*

*In a safe and caring environment, provide opportunities for all student, staff and the school community to be actively engaged in learning, to achieve personal success, to work together, to respect difference, to value cultural diversity and contribute positively to society beyond the school.*

*(Extract from Country HS's story, 2004)*

When my authorship was acknowledged, I became part of the story, and when it was not known, my role in its creation was hidden. This allowed teachers and school leaders to claim the story as their own, *and* it allowed me to claim it as theirs. This ambiguity raised a number of issues for me about my authority as author, and about the authenticity of this story. I explored what happened when I placed myself in the story and when I left myself out, and the unsettling ability (power) I had to do both simultaneously. By using words such as 'we' and 'our' I was claiming an insider's position, and was able to make less qualified observations. This 'story' of the school was unlike a more formal report that could be clearly distinguished as being written by an outsider because it had a 'first-hand' feel to it. In this way, the guise of the story allowed me to write more freely and my ability to slip from view made me less accountable. As Richardson suggests, 'How we are expected to write affects what we can write about.' (2000, p. 927). While 'the story' served, many useful purposes, it did fall silent.

These concerns echo those of educational researchers who have for some time now grappled with the need to make their research meaningful and accessible by grounding it in the everyday experiences of classroom teachers (Erickson, 1979); to talk with teachers about the adequacy of their theorising (Florio-Ruane, 1991); and to talk and listen in ways that value teachers as equal participants in the construction of knowledge about classrooms and schools (Buchman1983). More broadly, within the field of qualitative research concerns like this have given rise to a range of ethnographic genres, and writing has grown in acceptance as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). One thing that these narrative forms share is a recognition that stories have the potential to

displace the centrality of intellectuals (cf Beverley, 2000), they evolve out of conversations that have a 'reciprocal quality, breadth of subject matter, [and give room] to different voices' (Buchman, 1985, p. 17).

The year after this story was written I became involved in the *Changing Schools in Changing Times* research project - a three-year study in four schools, including Country HS. We picked up the story again and began to explore it as a means of communicating within the research. The longitudinal nature of the study meant that researchers needed regular opportunities to reflect with participants on the 'findings', to seek clarifications and to agree on descriptions of reform processes. Initially, this communication took place within each school and later it spread across the four schools as they agreed to share their stories with each other.

### **Description of the research**

In June 2004, the Commonwealth government funded the research project titled *Changing Schools in Changing Times* through the Australian Research Council's Linkage program. This project developed as a partnership between university-based academics and personnel located within the Equity Programs section of New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET). A central question that informed the development of this study was: How is it possible to develop a sustainable process of school change that improves students' learning outcomes in schools located within communities with deep needs?

The research began in four schools at the start of 2005. As well as Country HS, three metropolitan schools were included and their aliases reflect their geographic location (Eastern, South Western and Western High Schools). The schools were identified and approached through formal systemic channels and offered the opportunity to participate in the study. All four schools were engaged in various forms of whole school reform and were at various stages of implementation; all were receiving additional equity-based funding through the NSW DET Priority Schools Funding Program; and three of the schools had newly appointed first time principals. At the time of writing this paper, the first year of the study had been completed and two research cycles had been conducted in each school. Each cycle contained three events: a planning meeting, fieldwork and a feedback session.

The planning meeting brought together the school's leaders and members of the research team to exchange information about the school. In the first cycle, it took three or four meetings before the researchers felt they had sufficient insight into the school to commence the fieldwork. Some questions addressed to the school's leaders during these meetings included:

- What's the school attempting to improve?
- How will you know you've been successful?
- What is being done to achieve this goal?

The research team also outlined the form and nature of the research during initial meetings and in subsequent planning meetings provided progress reports and discussed possible modifications to the fieldwork.

The fieldwork was generally conducted over two consecutive days in the first half of the year and again in the second half of the year. It included up to six researchers in total conducting interviews and observations. Each visit, we focussed on one class by shadowing them for an entire day. We conducted focus groups with the students of this class and a separate focus group or phone interviews with some of their parents. We interviewed the teachers whose classes we observed, and we spoke with various other key personnel in the school including Head Teachers, and Aboriginal Education Workers.

Each feedback session was facilitated. The facilitator was not a member of the research team or the participating school, but was known to both (see later for details). These sessions provided regular opportunities for the research team to report on their findings, and for the school to provide clarification and additional information. Some questions that were addressed during this meeting included:

- What is the research suggesting about how the school works?
- What kind of learning takes place in classrooms?
- What kind of learning takes place in meetings?
- Does the culture support the kind of learning that will ensure success at school?

The use of the story in this research was introduced during the first year and it became a feature of the feedback sessions. As the stories needed to be read during these sessions, they were short and limited to one page (about 700 words). The research participants, mainly members of the senior executive made up of one Principal and usually two Deputy Principals, were given the opportunity to modify the story during the session, and offered the choice of limiting their circulation (all opted to allow the modified stories to be circulated beyond the school). In this way, they became negotiated representations of each school, and they delineated what could be said and how it could be stated.

An important aspect of these stories was anonymity and every effort was made to protect the names of individuals and the names of the schools. Even within NSW DET and the teachers' union, the schools were referred to by their pseudonyms, and requests to identify the schools were assessed on a need to know basis. And, within each school we were careful not to identify individuals in ways that may have been detrimental. At the same time, we attempted to shine a soft light on what we considered to be good pedagogical and leadership practices. Our caution in drawing too much attention to such practices is due to a prevailing egalitarian culture among Australian teachers that tends to resist the acknowledgment of individual differences, particularly in relation to comparing strengths *and* weaknesses in professional competencies.

In the next section, the stories are illustrated through selected extracts before discussing some questions that arise with their use, such as: whose stories are they; who can retell them, and for what purpose; and, how are they different to other representations of schools.

### **Illustrations of stories**

Initially, one of the most straightforward uses of these stories was to check the accuracy of our descriptions of the schools. About every six months, the researchers and some participants (usually the senior executive) came together to work with the most recent

version of the school's story. Sometimes, it was modified during these meetings, other times it was passed back and forth between the principal and research team leader until a version was agreed upon that could be more widely shared. Some school-based personnel noted that this process of co-construction provided a means by which they could develop a shared sense of identity and purpose. In order to write a common description of the school they needed a common understanding of it, how it functioned, and their roles within it.

When the stories started to be more widely circulated, it was necessary to consider what might make the schools vulnerable to identification by saying too much, and what might feed persistent negative social stereotypes of schools working under adverse conditions. The following paragraph from Eastern's story (cycle 1) provides a baseline description of the school at the start of the research. We attempted to include sufficient information about important local conditions while excluding information that may readily identify the school.

*In 2004, there were about 360 students and about 50 teachers. Many of the teachers were experienced and had long-term appointments at the school. Attendance and achievement rates were low compared to other schools in the area, and there was a concern that some parents chose not to send their kids there because they associated it with low achievement. There were few links to local primary schools, and community involvement in the school was minimal, as illustrated by low attendance rates at parent teacher nights.*

This extract contains specific features about Eastern, notably it's experienced staff and low teacher turnover (unusual features, in NSW at least, of a school located in a community with deep needs) and general features commonly found in many schools. In so much as it describes a certain type of school, others in similar circumstances may be able to relate to it and to its reform efforts. To facilitate this, we attempted to detail the form and nature of these efforts. For example, many schools have attempted to introduce professional learning teams with varying degrees of success and, since it was a key feature of Western's reform efforts, we attempted to describe it in some detail in its story (cycle 2).

*Teacher development continues to be supported through cross-faculty professional learning teams and mentoring by the team leaders. This is an important role as there are high numbers of beginning teachers on the staff. In early 2005, the PLTs were reshaped because of timetable constraints and according to how well they worked the previous year. PLT leaders have had two full days and one evening of professional learning to support them in their role. Every teacher's training and development is mapped out for the whole year*

*The plan for teams in 2006 is to restructure them to achieve a different mix of teachers that will cater more for individual needs and support deeper engagement. This change was thought to be necessary because, despite all the training, the PLTs are not 'humming' like they were in the initial year. Teachers, and head teachers in particular, complain about losing interest in PLTs. It is hoped that the new scheme will give the senior executive more control over the composition of PLTs and thereby better able to address the learning needs of teachers. Otherwise the structure remains the same: 8 teams, 7 teachers in each team, meeting once a fortnight (20 times a year) for one hour.*

Our intention was not that the stories would seed the replication of reform elsewhere but that they would problematise it. Within the participating school, this description of the purpose and operations of teams was drawn mainly from our discussions with the school's executive. Thus, it provided a means by which we could assess the degree to which other leaders and classroom teachers shared this understanding of how teams functioned in the school. Outside the participating school, it provided some insight into this school's sustained efforts with professional learning teams, and their determination to support and modify the teams to address particular needs - it was clear that the teams were a means to an end. Occasionally, quotes were used to illustrate points of view, such as a teacher's experience with teams at Country HS:

*Past experience suggests that there's no point just creating time for teams to meet because teachers have commented that: 'In the past, teams didn't do what we planned for them to do'; 'We were never really sure of whether we were to attend the meetings – it was a little bit wishy washy'; 'It was hard to get from anyone what the purpose of a team was, and it kept changing'.*

Sometimes, the stories traced the development of insights gained through reflection on reform. For example, at Country HS (cycle 2), the descriptions of teachers' and school leaders' work highlighted similarities between different sites in the school:

*Last year our attention turned towards supporting students and teachers learning how to learn together. An important realisation to come out of our investigations is that the conditions under which teachers are working in their classrooms take on a similar form in other sites of learning in the school – in teams, faculty meetings, executive meetings and senior executive meetings. We acknowledged that we can't ask faculties to have serious conversations about students' learning if we are unable to demonstrate and support this in executive meetings. And, we can't expect teachers to address student's learning if we are unable to support teachers' learning.*

These reflections generated the notion of *sites of pedagogical practice* which conceptualises the work of leaders and teachers as primarily pedagogical in purpose and operating in different locations but influenced by similar enabling and constraining conditions (Hayes 2005). Further iterations of the story allowed the research team to test that this concept was useful and meaningful to school-based personnel. Our claims about what appeared to be happening in the school were sometimes troubling, but their integration within a narrative suggested that the story was evolving – the end had not been written. Rewriting the story came to equate with school improvement, and provided a framework by which the researchers could collaborate with school-based colleagues.

Working with these stories, required high levels of trust between the researchers and the participants. As researchers, we felt a tension between saying what we felt needed to be said without outstripping teachers capacity to reasonably respond. Fine et al described this as leaving our informants 'carrying the burden of representations as we hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality' (2000, p.109). This burden was particularly challenging for school leaders who allowed their leadership practices to be placed under scrutiny. All schools leaders would resonate with the dilemma described in Country HS's story (cycle 2) but few would want this story told about their school:

*At the Executive conference in May 2004, we agreed that there is a mismatch between what we value and what we do, consequently we spend too much time on management and managing behaviours and not enough time supporting professional learning. This can lead to a displacement of responsibility for leading learning. We need to keep asking the question: Who leads learning?*

As the stories evolved, were retold and circulated the participants became more vulnerable, and the fine line between saying what needed to be said and violating confidentiality sharpened. We recognised the importance of 'telling it how it is' while also avoiding blaming and shaming individuals or the school. Consequently, we spoke in generalisations and avoided any descriptions that might identify individual teachers, students or parents. Since we spoke with a small number of parents, we produced a single story that was used in all four schools. This reduced local relevance but shielded local participants from exposure (Riele te, 2005). We attempted to create compelling justifications for improvement that resonated with the experiences of the research participants. The following extract from Eastern's story (cycle 2) illustrates how we handled sensitive yet important observations.

*The students we observed were likeable, bright and enthusiastic but as the day progressed, their teachers tended to have more and more difficulty involving them in the work they had planned. Students were generally expected to receive knowledge and transmit it, or to practice procedural routines. Very little content was connected to their interests, their community, or the contemporary world.*

*In 2005, time was made available for the HTs to focus on teaching and learning. There was some debate about whether support for teachers is the main responsibility of HTs?*

*The teachers we observed had different teaching styles and different approaches to classroom organisation and management. They expected different outcomes and types of behaviour from the class. We encountered some conflicting teacher expectations of student achievement: some indicated that expectations needed to be raised to engage students more, while others explained that lower expectations are required to address the learning needs of 'these kids'. It was acknowledged that teachers need to develop a consistent and shared understanding of what works for students at Eastern.*

This extract illustrates that the stories opened up spaces within each school to the view and scrutiny of others. These usually 'private' spaces included learning spaces such as classrooms, work spaces such as executive and faculty meetings, and personal spaces such as the thoughts of teachers and school leaders. In retelling the stories, we had to anticipate and manage the effects of this exposure, both within each school and beyond. While each story is about a single school, we could not assume that each site represents a geographic space of shared experience, neither could we consider that the experiences of school leaders, teachers, students and parents are totally insulated from each other (cf. Fine, Weiss, Weseen & Wong, 2000, p.111).

The stories drew attention to similarities and differences between the schools. For example, a persistent theme in three of the four schools was the tendency of teachers to attribute problems with classroom management to students' behaviours and poor attitudes towards school; and low achievement levels to family background and other

socio-economic factors. This troubling discourse had a 'taken-for-granted' status in the schools in which it had a foothold. However at Western, the principal enforced a strong counter-discourse couched in terms that all students can learn.

*'I don't think anyone in this school would be game enough to say to me you can't do it with these kids because they know it's head ripping off material for me'.*

In constructing these stories we have always emphasised that they provided only limited views of each school. This is because we observed only a handful of the total number of classes and interviewed only a small percentage of teachers, students and parents. In addition, we made selections about what to include or leave out. We have attempted to work with this process of selection and to treat it as a feature to be taken into account, rather than as a problem to be overcome. In the case of Western, we are continuing to explore what the emphasis on teams in its story draws our attention away from; and to ask what else is going on here?

### **How do these stories function?**

*Conversation as a research method is very likely to yield stories as data  
Florio-Ruane, 1991, p.240*

The stories provide communication pathways in our research. Primarily, they provide a mechanism by which the observations of the research team can be tested, clarified and modified by the research participants (sometimes with surprising effects). They also provided information to participants about their own school and a means of comparison with others.

The use of the word 'story' is not intended to suggest that these narratives are benign, or that constructing and passing them on involves few risks. For this reason, we ensured that each version was approved by each school's senior executive before it was more widely circulated. We anticipated that they would request the removal of some observations and interpretations (and they occasionally did) but they have been consistently self-critical and willing to share the breadth of their experiences with others. For example, at Western HS, the school leaders often spoke about the dilemma of working with teachers 'that do' and 'those that don't'. They feared that despite their best efforts, some teachers' classroom practices had not improved. The principal encouraged us to retain the following quote in which this classification of teachers is explained in their story (cycle 2).

*'You've got a core group of teachers who are very on board and are also your more skilful classroom practitioners... you've got your less experienced ones who can't quite grasp all that we're putting forward at the moment, and your resisters. The advance lip service people who say, 'oh' yes, yes, yes' – then go and do what they want anyway.' [5]*

The inclusion of this viewpoint provided a means by which the school leaders chose to 'send a message' to the teachers they considered to be resisting reform. They were confident that teachers were able to identify which group they belonged to according to whether 'the cap fitted'. In this way, the executive coopted the story for their purposes and used it as a means to leverage support for their reform efforts.

The stories emerged out of our agreement to provide the participating schools with ongoing feedback during the three years of the project. Our goal was twofold: first, to support the participating schools in their reform efforts and, second, to contribute to the research on whole school change by saying something about how schools improve. Research in this field is often criticised for saying too much about what good schools look like, not enough about how they came to be that way, and very little about schools working under adverse conditions. We wanted to engage the participating schools in really useful reflective dialogue. As well as producing the standard research outputs (papers and reports), we also wanted to support the researchers and participants in our study to learn together about what works and how to make it happen in these schools.

One of the key ways we attempted to do this was to invite a respected colleague, Ann King (former principal of Ashfield Boys High), to facilitate the feedback sessions, which were held at the end of each cycle about once every six months. Using various approaches to structured conversation that guided dialogue through agreed protocols, we worked with the stories as a means of describing our collective (participant and researcher) experiences. This process shares many similarities with the 'description' part of Rodgers' (2002) reflective cycle – 'the process of telling the story of experience...through collaboration, to dig up as many details as possible, from as many different angles as possible, so that one is not limited to the sum of one's own perceptions' (p. 6). Our working with these stories went beyond creating and negotiating their form, it included coming together to consider their implications and the effects of the practices they describe: particularly on learning. In email correspondence, Ann King described her role as,

*Trying to facilitate a learning conversation: one which can lead to change; a process in which the group does not feel a need to explain or defend their 'performance'; a process where we actively listen and help the group to not only think about the story but to also think about their reactions to the story. To feel safe to do this we are encouraging honesty around each other's thoughts and feelings on a range of issues that emerge in the story. We work hard at not being judgmental but try to think and talk about how things are - to build on each other's perceptions of things.*

*Also, to help the individual members of the group to see the various perspectives from which others in the group are coming. We are trying to open up to the possibility of our own learning. In order to begin thinking about the effects of our current approaches we are trying to avoid solution directed thinking by trying to see things as they really are. We also encourage thought processes that do not seek to solve "problems" but rather seek to create something different to what appears in our stories at this stage.*

*Margaret Wheatley<sup>1</sup> would argue that we need to get into the messiness of the data - before we try and see what it means - generate as much information as we can - it will lead to confusion - but that is the only place to be if we want to really be open to new thoughts - we need to have a period of letting go and confusion - before we can generate new understandings.*

Our challenge was to hold the conversation in the messiness and the confusion long enough to agree on how things are and what we would like them to be like. We had to

resist solution driven conversations in order to focus on the problem. We imagined the type of story we wanted to tell, rather than what we wanted to do to change the current story. This kind of conversation is counter-intuitive to many teachers who are so accustomed to reflection-in-action rather than reflection-on-action. We acknowledged that the latter had the potential to generate a different kind of discussion and suggest a different approach to change – one that starts with where we want to be and then maps backward from that point, thus suggesting a direction to get there. We came to recognise a particular type of description that was powerful and provocative – it made us pay attention to it and, when we observed some basic norms of professional dialogue, it generated new understandings.

### **Conclusion**

Similarities and differences between the participating schools were brought into relief through the stories. Perhaps most telling is the simple fact that school leaders and teachers were prepared to create these stories at a time when systems were (and are) retreating from acknowledging difference and differential provision in education. It is a misreading to blame teachers and schools for the realities that they lay bare in these narratives. Instead we should focus attention on our collective social responsibility to achieve more equitable educational provision, and question moves to out-source this need to an indifferent market.

The challenge of working collaboratively with school-based colleagues on sustaining school improvement in communities with deep needs is fundamentally a challenge of how to sustain professional learning – both the learning of teachers and school leaders, as well as the learning of researchers and system personnel. The stories are a key feature of how we are attempting to learn together. They are helping us understand and describe the schools and how they work, our challenge is to learn together to make the schools work differently.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Wheatley is the Co-Founder and President Emeritus of The Berkana Institute <http://www.berkana.org> (accessed February 28, 2006)

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