The primary LOTE curriculum: the teachers and the impact of their stories

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Introduction

Should you ask me, whence these stories?

Whence these legends and traditions?

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807-1882

The Song of Hiawatha, introduction

Stories about classrooms abound: they tell of the ordinary and the amazing, the humorous and the horrendous. There have always been classroom stories and always will be. A large number of these stories are told by teachers. The question about stories of classrooms and teaching should perhaps not be whence, rather why or how, for it is the significance of the common story-telling device which creates an impact.

The stories discussed in this paper come from primary teachers of
languages other than English (LOTE). Sandy, Rhonda and Jodie (not their real names) are primary LOTE teachers in three Tasmanian schools and their stories have been sought as part of a PhD research study. These teachers are hopeful that the significance of their stories might help other LOTE teachers as well as LOTE planners.

Sandy, Rhonda and Jodie have agreed to be a part of this collaborative research because they believe that the portraits painted through the stories of their individual cases will inform all aspects of primary LOTE education; from planning and budgeting to implementing and evaluating. Our collective hope is that collaboration on the issues surrounding primary LOTE education (reported through story) will strengthen the primary LOTE case, allowing dialogue to continue and improving the position of individual cases and general awareness and support from the wider Australian community.

Providing these teachers with a regular weekly or fortnightly forum to express themselves through story, a most common method of explaining experience in all walks of life, has been an empowering experience for all involved.

‘New times’ narrative inquiry research for primary LOTE education can and will make an impact on how LOTE teachers view theory and practice by allowing the teacher to find ways of explaining their experience. This ‘new times’ narrative inquiry research is slowly but surely establishing itself as a respected research methodology. As Beattie
(1996, p. 155) states, the purpose of such research ‘… is to advance
the ways in which we understand the connections between the knowledge
created through past experience and the creation of new professional
knowledge’.

What is described below is research aimed at identifying issues
surrounding the implementation of primary LOTE programs in Tasmania. In
a study with three collaborating teachers, this research expects to
shed light on the implementation of the early stages of the Tasmanian
LOTE policy as LOTE is constructed in three different classrooms.
Specifically this paper sets out to explain the processes involved in
studying three cases of primary LOTE teachers who, through their
narrative, throw light on the issues inherent in how LOTE education is
constructed in their classrooms.

Background to the study

‘Over the past 10 years in Australia, primary LOTE has received much
attention. This has occurred especially in reference to funding and
curriculum planning.’

(Harbon and Horton-Stephens, 1997, p.1)

Australian states and territories have responded to the various
national language policies and documents (Lo Bianco, 1987; DEET, 1991;
COAG, 1994; Curriculum Corporation, 1994; MCEETYA, 1994) by developing
LOTE policies. Tasmania was one of the last states to develop such a
policy and in October 1995, the then Department of Education and the
Arts presented the Languages Other Than English Policy which
acknowledges four pathway languages (French, German, Indonesian and
Japanese) and guarantees a pathway for continued language study between
Grades 3 and 101. Although not mandatory, the LOTE policy has been
implemented in Grades 3 and 4 in approximately 40 primary schools

Narrative inquiry research in this area will allow the researcher and
the collaborating teachers to tell the stories: the sacred and the
secret stories2, and by reconstructing experience3, shed light on LOTE
policy implementation, thereby informing LOTE planning. These teachers
are able to share their narrative and through collaborative reporting
methods, the teacher and researcher together will be able to report,
evaluate and plan again.

Definitions

Narrative inquiry is inquiry into narrative. When ‘…persons note
something of their experience over time [they]do so in storied form…’
(Clandinin and Connelly, 1996, p. 29). Story is one way we seek to
explain experience. ‘Narrative names the structured quality of
experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996, p. 29). Scholars involved in
this research method usually distinguish the phenomenon story from the
inquiry narrative.
Collection of field texts features prominently in the data collection stages of narrative inquiry research. Field texts, or rich sources of data, can be found in a range of sources: oral histories, telling or writing of stories, annals or chronicles, photographs or memory boxes or artifacts, interviews, journals, autobiographical or biographical writing, letters, conversations, field notes and document analyses (Connelly and Clandinin, 1997, pp. 82-84). Ball (1997, p. 312) classifies these data as:

- observation data - the researcher’s own first-hand data;
- respondent data - derived from interviewing or diaries;
- enumeration data - the counting of events, categories of behaviour, types of people and other numerical data; and
- documentary data - the use of files, records, ephemera, and so on.

In this study with three primary LOTE teachers representing three cases, this research expects to shed light on the implementation of the Tasmanian LOTE policy through a collaborative reporting process.

Collaboration

Collaborative research is defined as research involving those participating and collaborating in all phases of the research process.

‘…those responsible for action in improving it, widening the collaborating group from those most directly involved to as many as possible of those affected by the practices concerned.’ (Kemmis, 1997,
Like the processes used by Beattie in her description of pre-service teacher education, collaborative research allows the teacher to enter into conversation about the past and present, reflect on the possible links between past and present, make connections, see contradictions between theory and practice, dialogue the processes and

‘...this kind of collaboration through writing involves extending each individual’s inquiry into the connections between past, present and future experiences and knowledge, and moving towards the recasting of the self into a new unity where personal and professional are one.’
(Beattie, 1996, p. 162)

Inherent in the process of collaborative research is the notion that the researcher and collaborating subject have isolated some field texts which then must be converted into research texts. In the research described below, this is the process of co-constructing the stories at a later point in time.

‘Field texts tend to be close to experience, descriptive, and shaped around specific events... Research texts... the author needs to understand the meaning of the narrative and its significance for others and for social issues. Research texts, therefore, tend to be patterned’
(Connelly and Clandinin, 1997, p. 84)
Inquiring through narrative is a relatively new qualitative educational research methodology. Narrative inquiry is a notable addition to the second edition of 'Educational Research, Methodology, and Measurement' (Keeves, 1997, pp. 81-86) not included in the first edition (Keeves, 1988). Within the boundaries of the social sciences, narrative inquiry in education allows the study of experience. If, as Brookfield says, 'We teach to change the world' (Brookfield, 1995, p. 1), then studying how key players within that world describe the world is informative. 'One learns about education from thinking about life, and one learns about life from thinking about education' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996, p. 29).

According to Beattie (1996, p. 163ff), portraits of various facets of the teachers' personal and professional lives are storied and co-constructed by the researcher and collaborating teacher. These snippets of stories are able to be presented as patterned documents and can have many effects: from informing policy and practice to allowing the teachers to plan action research.

Three primary LOTE teachers were approached to collaborate in this research. Although teaching in different schools in different districts, the teachers were given the opportunity to tell their LOTE stories: both 'sacred', ie. '…this theory-driven view of practice shared by practitioners, policy makers, and theoreticians' (Clandinin
and Connelly, 1996, p. 25) and ‘secret’, ie. stories from ‘...behind the classroom door… where teachers are free to live stories of practice’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996, p. 25)

Stages of data collection

Firstly, collecting field texts in a literature review stage, national and state documents were analysed. A list of LOTE documents was drawn up and referred to in interviews with the collaborating teachers. This list will also assist the analysis stage of the research.

Faced with eliciting primary LOTE teachers' stories, a series of observation sessions were undertaken to give an 'at-a-glance' indicator of LOTE teacher behaviours during LOTE lessons (See Appendix 1 for Primary LOTE Teacher Behaviours Observation Instrument). Frequency tallies were taken of observable LOTE teacher behaviours at 20 second intervals in the classrooms, according to whether behaviour was occurring in English, LOTE, or a mix of English and the LOTE. These data were used in two ways. Firstly this numerical data helped created a picture of the teacher and his/her teaching style and secondly, interview sessions (which occurred after the observation) were informed, ie. had a basis upon which lines of inquiry were formulated. Then, at mutually convenient times, LOTE teacher and researcher set aside time to 'unpack' the related issues which had evolved from the observations or which had emerged from the literature.
The interview venues were either a classroom or the office space assigned to the LOTE teacher. The interview sessions for each of the three teachers were initially quite formal, but as teacher and researcher came to know each other, the atmosphere became more relaxed. Transcripts of the last interview with Jodie shows her being thanked for her honesty, a trait that can only come in a mutually trusting and collaborative atmosphere. The collaborating teachers were so relaxed, they sometimes began to tell their stories before recording began.

The structure of the interviews was open-ended, hoping the collaborating teacher would take the conversation in the direction they chose. The ‘Tell me about…’ line of inquiry was the most successful way of allowing the teacher to tell the stories. (See Appendix 2 for examples of lines of inquiry during interview sessions.) The following is an example of the story Sandy told after I asked her to tell me her own LOTE story.

‘I was born here and my parents still live here and [I] went to the local primary school (not this local primary school) and the local high school, where I did French. Yeah, so I did four years of French. But I wasn’t overly interested in languages, I suppose ‘cause then it wasn’t a cultural thing. It was purely a language structure. It was a mass of words that you had to know and all the tenses and things that French is. And we never did any cooking or anything. I didn’t even know what a French person looked like or anything much like that…’

Interview, Teacher 1, 25 November 1996
Sandy went on to complete the picture of her own LOTE story, frustrated that during a trip to France years later, it became obvious to her that the LOTE she had learnt at high school was not sufficient.

'We were stuck in Nice and we wanted some information on how to get out. And I went to the train station and there was this guy sitting behind the counter and I tried my school-girl French. Well! He wouldn't have a bar of me! He just sort-of totally ignored me… I was sort-of losing my confidence very badly at that stage…'

Interview, Teacher 1, 25 November 1996

Reflecting on this, Sandy believes that as a result of her own story, her ‘vision’ for primary LOTE education is filling in a background to make it seem real.

‘…doing a background, especially for a LOTE, that’s really important. But, well, I guess now it comes back to me. I never had it [background], so it was just a language thing… But there was no filling in of the background to LOTE. It seemed unreal.’

Interview, Teacher 1, 26 November 1996

Sandy’s comment on the reflection made possible through this narrative inquiry research was,

‘Yes, that made me think all over again and that's so astonishing. It
just felt like that and I, you know, you put those things in the back of your mind. Gee, and reading it all again, brought it all back.’

Interview, Teacher 1, 18 July 1997

Findings

To date, data are comprised of:
document analysis (including state and national language policies, national curriculum documents, school and cluster position papers, units of work and classroom materials, including handouts and worksheets);
frequency tally recordings of observed LOTE teacher behaviours;
transcribed interviews, including stories.

Recurrent themes found in the collaborating teachers’ stories are yet to be fully analysed, but the following are themes emerging, appearing often as metaphors in each of the three teachers’ stories. There are both positive and negative themes.

LOTE can be fascinating and fun from the start; LOTE must be included in a balanced primary curriculum; some subjects taught because teachers have to, but LOTE taught because teachers want to;
teachers are ‘feeling the way/testing the water/unsure’ as regards curriculum development and strategies of practice;
teachers find themselves teaching LOTE either exactly the way they were taught, or conversely, exactly opposite to the way they were taught during their own schooling.
The collaborating teachers told different stories which portray these images and metaphors, not only helping to paint portraits of the teacher him/herself, but also of the LOTE context. Speaking about how she plans for primary LOTE, Rhonda told the following story which highlighted not only her specific needs and considerations in that situation, but a wider issue of how LOTE is a learning area which touches the lives of students sometimes in a very personal, intimate way.

‘…surprising things come out which I didn’t know. Like yesterday I was talking about Islam in Indonesia with the Grade 4s and one of the children came up to me later and said ‘Oh, actually, I’m a Moslem’ which I didn’t know! I should have suspected, but I really didn’t know, so. That’s quite fascinating. I suddenly realised that child would have quite a different view of things that I was talking about with Indonesia. She had a lot of those understandings being a Moslem.’

Interview, Teacher 2, 17 July 1997

For a narrative inquiry research report to allow other primary Indonesian teachers to reflect on that teacher’s ‘secret’ story, significant issues such as planning considerations for individual students and their religious affiliations should be at the fore. Such a story may also lead teachers to believe that it is not the ‘sacred’ stories, rather the ‘secret’ stories which will capture the essence of what really happens and needs to be planned for in classrooms.

Field texts to research texts
The co-construction stage of this research is about to begin. It has become evident that the teachers' knowledge of primary LOTE education is not always self-evident or apparent to them, but is ‘…situated in their personal knowledge, in their own particular classroom experiences, and in their conception of their own differences’ (Zellermayer, 1997, p. 207). This research will allow these teachers to come together next year in a more structured meeting and collaboratively analyse stories and themes to shed further light on primary LOTE education.

Shaping the texts

This co-construction will necessitate the conversion of field texts to research texts. ‘Ordinarily the process consists of construction of a series of increasingly interpretative writings.’ (Connelly and Clandinin, 1997, p. 84)

The field texts gathered in this research (document analyses, observations, stories elicited from interviews) are, as stated by Connelly and Clandinin (1997, p. 84) ‘…close to experience, descriptive and shaped around specific events’. The task at hand now will be the conversion of these document analyses, observations and stories into more distanced writings, tracing ‘…meaning and significance, giving an
understanding for wider social issues’.

‘Field texts are shaped into research texts by the underlying narrative threads and themes that constitute the driving force of the inquiry’ (Connelly and Clandinin, 1997, p. 84)

A certain amount of the shaping of these field texts into research texts may be undertaken in the collaborative processes, working in conjunction with the teachers.

Significance of the research

A timely reminder of the strength of such a methodology in this research has been each teacher’s reflection that these storytelling opportunities have become an empowering tool. In the second case, Rhonda stated at one stage that ‘I’ve certainly talked far more about my teacher practice with LOTE than I ever have done in other subjects’. Interview, Teacher 2, 17 July 1997

It seems logical that discussion on implementation of policy begins with the teacher, based on the narrative genre which is so familiar and comfortable; where the teacher is telling the ‘secret’ stories and construction of knowledge is occurring when experience is explained through both the ‘sacred’ and ‘secret’ stories. Storytelling is a daily occurrence and can be a vehicle to give voice to primary LOTE teachers. This rich source of field data may well have been overlooked
previously.

With the ability of these three teachers to explore and uncover meaning in the ‘sacred’ and ‘secret’ stories, this may lead not only to LOTE teachers improving their primary LOTE teaching strategies, but also to others in the wider LOTE education network or even in other fields. The question in ‘new times’ educational research will not be whence these stories, rather whether stories are considered.

We are now beginning to understand the value and strength in allowing teachers to construct and reconstruct their own personal narratives to guide, shape and inform their theory and practice of teaching and learning. As Jodie said, with the process of reflecting, telling and re-telling stories, her knowledge of primary LOTE education has become clearer.

‘...I also feel as if I’ve learnt a lot and I, I’m starting to get to that stage now, the reflection stage, I mean, I’ve done reflecting as I’ve gone along, but I’m starting to get to that stage where I’m reflecting over a year’s practice... But I think, what you’re asking me to do, is..., reflecting back... And I don’t always have the right answer yet, but I’m thinking about it.’

Interview, Teacher 3, 13 November 1997
Notes

This pathway is guaranteed, providing the students remain within the same cluster of feeder primary schools and high schools.

Clandinin and Connelly 1996, speak of the difference between ‘...this theory-driven view of practice shared by practitioners, policy makers and theoreticians as having the quality of a sacred story and a story of what teachers perceive to occur in the classroom,’ (p. 25) ie. the difference between the 'sacred' theory/policy-driven rhetoric and the 'secret' stories, what really happens according to teachers.

Reconstruction of stories between the researcher and the collaborating teachers is a characteristic of narrative inquiry, as documented in Beattie (1996).

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