

Telling stories: Sustaining whole school change in schools located in communities with deep needs (HAY05565)

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Changing Schools, Changing Times: the first year*

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Abstract

We know what good schools look like. Experience tells us how hard it is to create and maintain them, particularly when they are operating under adverse conditions – 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 was designed to investigate ways in which schools working under these conditions can engage in sustained whole school change. The research team was faced with the dilemma of how to hold conversations with participants because, like them, we were also working under conditions that made it difficult to get 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 conversations that could be regularly and readily shared and negotiated with research participants. We started to scratch together short stories about schools that drew on all our data sources, and shared them with each other and the research participants. They 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 lot 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 ameliorated through school-based reforms, others are beyond the influence of local responses. For example, Country High is located in a rural town. It has a small core of local teachers, but most 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 'beginingness'. In one three year

period, Country High 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 7th was unfilled); and the two Deputy Principals were in their third year of appointment. While these problems at Country 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 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 and Liston, 1996). Our challenge as researchers was to develop ways of describing, recording and working with these conditions, while also supporting school-based colleagues as they attempted to undertake whole school change. As in cultures where oral traditions keep alive customs and practices through the generations, so too, schools like Country High need their own story and storytellers to pass on the messages of teaching and learning. When this works, such a story enables teachers and communities to speak with one enduring voice to young people, to communities, and to each other, about the value and purpose of schooling and of learning. With this goal in mind, a story was written about Country High in 2004. It became something of a touchstone – a means of reminding teachers and school leaders of the path they had travelled, as well as a description of these events that could be shared with others. It was hopeful and designed to build commitment and support for the direction in which the school was heading. It began in the following way:

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.

In my capacity as an academic partner to the school, I wrote the story from the perspective of an insider. My position was funded through an equity program and was aimed at assisting the school initiate whole school improvement. 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. Subsequently, I became involved in a three-year research project in four schools, including Country High. 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.

Background to 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 NSW Department of Education and Training (DET). A central question that informed the development of this study was, in schools located within communities with deep needs, how is it possible to develop a sustainable process of whole school change that improves students' learning outcomes?

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 DET channels, and offered the opportunity to participate in the three-year 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 involved up to three or four meetings. Some questions addressed to the school's leaders during this meeting 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 this initial meeting 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 cycle 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 with some of their parents. We also conducted phone interviews with some 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 within and 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 NSW Teachers Federation, 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. We recognised the dominance of an egalitarian culture among Australian teachers that tends to resist the acknowledgment of individual variations, 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 the stories was to check the accuracy of descriptions of the schools. Every six months, the researchers and some participants (usually the senior executive) came together to work with the most recent version of the story in each school. 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. One effect of this process of co-construction of the story was that it appeared to assist school-based personnel to develop a shared sense of identity and purpose. In working on a common description of the school, they too needed a common understanding of it, how the school 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 its 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. The stories tracked these efforts over time – they became records of change. Within the limited number of words available, we attempted to provide sufficient details about 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), as well as the changes that were being planned.

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 a 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.

Sometimes, the stories traced developments and insights gained through reflection on reform. At Country (cycle 2), these reflections produced real insights into change 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.

Occasionally, quotes were used to illustrate points of view, such as teachers past experiences with teams at Country:

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'.

The stories allowed the researchers to make claims and to have these tested by the participants. Sometimes these claims were speculative, combining information from a range of data sources, and occasionally they were troubling analyses of what was happening in each school, but their integration with a narrative form seemed to suggest that the story was evolving – the end had not been written. Rewriting the story came to equate with school improvement.

Working with these stories, required high levels of trust between the researchers and the participants. As researchers, we needed to figure out ways of saying what we felt needed to be said without jeopardizing our informants who could be 'left carrying the burden of representations as we hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality' (Fine, Weiss, Weseen & Wong, 2000, p.109). This burden was particularly challenging for school leaders who allowed their leadership practices to be examined. All leaders in the participating schools felt familiar with the dilemma described in Country's story (cycle 2):

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?

We continually checked the stories with the research participants as they evolved. We were aware that as the stories were circulated within and beyond the participating schools, they became more exposed, and the fine line between saying what needed to be said and violating confidentiality was highlighted. 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. 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.

Issues with student behaviours tend to dissipate with progression into higher Years. It is acknowledged that the students appreciate good classroom practice.

In 2005, time was made available for the HTs to focus on teaching and learning? There is 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 is acknowledged that teachers need to develop a consistent and shared understanding of what works for students as Eastern.

While each story is about a single school, we should 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 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 musings of senior executive. In retelling the stories, we had to anticipate and manage the effects of the information they contained both within each school and beyond.

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 students' behaviours, 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'

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 government policy that out-sources this unrelenting need to an indifferent market.

In constructing these stories we have always emphasised that they provided only limited views of each school. This is because the researchers observed only a handful of the total number of classes and interviewed only small percentage of teachers, students and parents. In addition, we made selections about what to include or leave out. Even so, we have attempted to work with this process of selection and to treat it as a feature to be taken into account and made problematic, rather than as a problem to be overcome. In the case of Western, we are interested in what the emphasis on teams in its story draws out attention away from? What else was important? And, in the case of Eastern, how did the negative construction of the school as small, draw our attention away from potential benefits of its size.

How do these stories function?

The stories provide communication pathways within, and beyond, the 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 (participants' and researchers') experience. 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. ?). 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 judgemental 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 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 an understanding of how things are what we would like them to be like. We had to resist fixing 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 reflection-in-action rather than reflection-on-action. We interpreted the latter as generating a different kind of discussion and suggesting a different kind of approach to change – one that starts with where we want to be and then maps backward from that point to how we will 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 basics norms of professional dialogue, it generated new understandings.

Conclusion

The challenge of working collaboratively with school-based colleagues on sustaining whole school change 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. Investigating and solving this challenge, is providing us with insights into how to improve student learning. 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 task now is to learn together to make the schools work differently.

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