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ABSTRACT

This document reports on the use of personal narratives about teaching in early childhood preservice teacher education programs. The first part of the paper outlines a study which examined staff and student perceptions of the use of stories about teaching practice in a teacher education program in Brisbane, Australia. The second part of the paper examines a new Bachelor of Teaching program in the School of Early Childhood at the Queensland University of Technology (Australia), which used case study literature and provided students with direct contact with teachers in the field. It is concluded that, by using personal narratives about teaching, teacher educators can improve their ability to support students' efforts to become early childhood teachers. (MM)

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*Developing Personal Practical Knowledge in Early Childhood Teacher Education:  
The Use of Personal Narratives*

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### *Introduction.*

Questions about how best to go about preparing people for teaching are far from fully resolved. Teacher education is under pressure for change from external sources, but questions also exist within: questions about the nature of teachers' expert knowledge and about how best to develop such expertise. Some of these questions have arisen as a result of recent research conducted into the nature of teachers' personal practical knowledge. Such research suggests that an important part of the professional development of teachers lies in their reflections of their own work and in the informal sharing of stories about their personal practice that so frequently occur whenever teachers come together. From a growing body of research in the ethnographic and interpretivist traditions rich accounts of teaching have been produced. These case studies, oral histories and narratives are in a sense 'stories of practice'. Like stories, they provide rich detail about events and the context in which they occurred. They try to stay as close as possible to the original source and have a satisfying completeness. But how is this rich body of information about teaching being used in early childhood teacher education programs and how might these insights be utilized to develop enhanced approaches to the development of personal practical knowledge in pre-service teacher education students?

In the first section of this paper, I will report very briefly on what might be termed the conventional use of stories of practice in a preservice teacher education program in Brisbane Australia. At the time this data was being gathered during 1989-1990 (in the School of Early Childhood, at the Queensland University of Technology) Gail Halliwell and myself became particularly interested in more innovative uses of narratives of teaching in preservice teacher education. Both jointly and severally we utilized our new understandings in designing two quite different subjects in our major preservice early childhood teacher education program. One was an introductory first year subject which I coordinated and the other a final semester subject coordinated by Gail. In Part Two of this paper, I'd like to share with you some of the insights and outcomes of these two innovations.

#### *A Conventional View of Teacher Education*

The traditional view of the process of teacher education could be described as the student's gradual accumulation of selected knowledge from the public domain, including content area knowledge and general pedagogic and child development information, the acquisition of discrete practical skills and the development of those attitudes or values deemed appropriate in early childhood education. Some recent writers (Buchmann, 1990; Calderhead, 1988; Lampert and Clark, 1991)

however, have suggested that such a conventional view may be a less than accurate portrayal of how professional expertise is developed. Lampert and Clark (1991:21) suggest that the way in which teachers acquire and use knowledge is contextual, interactive and speculative. One of the unintended consequences of the conventional view is that students often are perceived to be rather passive participants as the knowledge, skills and dispositions are gained through on-campus learning activities and are then perceived to be 'applying theoretical knowledge' as they venture into the field for practice teaching (Battersby 1990; Russell, 1988). This leads to the creation of a false dichotomy between what is presumed to be learned on campus, commonly called 'theory' and what occurs in the field, commonly called 'practice'. This view is by no means limited to teacher educators. It is shared by many teachers in the field and students themselves. But like Roth (1989) and Russell, Munby, Spafford and Johnston (1988), I believe it to be an extremely limiting perspective for students, both in terms of their emerging understandings of teachers' work and their understanding of their own professional development. Such a perspective does not help students appreciate that teaching is not the simple application of theory generated by others; that teachers are theory builders, problem solvers, decision makers and persons with an extensive and highly elaborated personal practical knowledge (Calderhead, 1988; Elbaz, 1983) that they develop and utilize through action.

Lampert and Clark (1991) suggest that much of our conventional teaching of teachers is based on generalized principles. In this approach, students are presented with a collection of such principles, distilled from research and the shared experience of teacher educators. As teacher educators, these generalized principles may represent the most concise, meaningful encapsulation of our knowledge of teaching. But what meaning do such principles hold for our students? It may be that they hold important meaning for us because we already have an extensive knowledge of practice- our personal and shared collections of particular cases. To a novice, without such a coalescence of experience (Clandinin 1986), the generalizations may be far less powerful; far less meaningful (Lampert and Clark, 1991; Tamir, 1991).

As Lampert (1985) has pointed out, a teacher's knowledge of teaching is essentially particularistic. Teachers tend to think not in general terms, but in particulars- particular children, balancing of particular concerns, particular circumstances, particular problems to be solved (McLean 1991). In Leinhardt's (1988) terms, the knowledge is 'situated knowledge'. So perhaps we should not be too surprised if students fail to greet our generalized principles with the same enthusiasm as ourselves, or be unable to apply such principles consistently across diverse practical situations.

The conventional view of teacher education as the gradual accumulation of discrete knowledge and skills also has been criticised because of its technical orientation: its inability to develop in students a critically reflective stance that requires them to probe their own 'lived landscapes' (Greene 1981), to reflect on the origins of their own beliefs and practices and consider the ways in which these empower, or fail to empower others (Battersby, 1989).

A number of converging areas of research interest and writing have suggested that case studies or teachers' own narratives might be a promising resource in developing new conceptualizations and strategies for teacher education, particularly that part of teacher education that is concerned with the development of expertise and practical knowledge. (For example, Comber and Hancock, 1987; Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, 1990; Kilbourn, 1988; Schubert, 1989; Shulman, 1987; Smith, 1986; Tamir, 1991.) Although storytelling always has played an important role in the life of all cultures, in our current social context with its heavy emphasis on science and technology, storytelling has been considered a relatively low status form of communication (Coles, 1989; Postman, 1989). Certainly in teacher education, story sharing about the practices of teaching has not been considered a serious strategy for developing knowledge, skills or dispositions in pre-service students.

Recent research attention has been focused on the use of stories in education- both as a way of understanding children's meanings (Egan, 1988) and in another literature, as a way of understanding the meanings teaching holds for teachers themselves (Ayers, 1989; Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, 1990). King (1991) asked his graduate students to write case histories of teachers, as a way of helping them uncover and ponder the meanings teaching held for the teachers and themselves. He states: 'I know the power of teachers' stories. They are important ways in which teachers (as well as others) communicate the norms, rules, consequences and payoffs of what it means to be a teacher' (p. 58).

In early childhood also, recent educational research in the ethnographic tradition has begun to produce rich, detailed accounts of the work of teachers (Ayers, 1989; McLean, 1991; Yonemura, 1986), but there has been little documentation of the existing use made of stories of practice, in preservice teacher education programs.

## *PART 1: A Research Project on Use of Stories of Practice*

A study was carried out to examine the use of stories of practice in two early childhood preservice teacher education programs in Arizona and Queensland. However, only the Australian data is reported in this paper. The study examined staff and student perceptions on the use of stories of practice and included multiple data gathering strategies including surveys, interviews and journals.

In brief, it was found that a great many stories were shared between staff and students, but relatively few of these were written stories or case studies. Most were oral accounts, often told by the lecturer in a relatively spontaneous manner to support a point being made. Although all staff considered such oral storytelling a valuable teaching strategy, for most, the story was definitely in a supporting role, rather than occupying central importance. For a few staff however, stories were given much greater emphasis and they selected and organized their stories as an integral part of the formal plan for the lecture or tutorial.

As staff and students talked about the stories they had told or heard in class, it became clear that they categorized stories rather differently. For the staff members, stories were categorized according to the level of detail they contained, whether the use of the story was planned or spontaneous, but most importantly, by the content of the story- its usefulness in terms of the particular point being made or its relevance to the more general subject matter under discussion.

From the student perspective, stories were categorized, and subsequently recalled because of their impact. For example, they spoke of funny stories, stories of good days and bad days, human stories and a large group of 'real' stories. But one of the most interesting categories was the 'horror story'- sometimes told by a staff member, but more frequently recounted by a peer. Horror stories were powerful because they told of events the students hoped they would never encounter and because the students appreciated the paradox that sometimes very negative events in life, in retrospect are also very funny. Students also appreciated these stories because they perceived them to be a window on the realities of teachers' lives. Through vicarious experience students felt they could learn from such stories without having to undergo the trauma personally. Through the sharing of one's own horror story it seemed a degree of reinterpretation occurred and the experience was seen in a more positive light. Students were able to say: 'I'm not the only one who has worked through the difficulties of teaching. It was pretty tough at the time, but I coped.... I'm doing okay'

Such stories were only infrequently told by staff members and then only with great care. But one wonders whether we have been guilty in teacher education of presenting an overly-sanitized version of teaching to our students- one that has been stripped of the complexity and perplexity that are part of real life experience for teachers. Thomas (1985:222) has written of teaching children:

"In teaching we are too often persuaded to be gentle, fearing that we shall damage our children if we immerse them in dissonance or perplexity... But perhaps it is we who fear the perplexity and disorder that for them is already intrinsic to life... To be educated is to know what depths await us underneath the surface."

I suspect Thomas's remarks could apply equally to the education of teachers and the determination to portray teaching as a complex, sometimes ambiguous form of professional work, was influential in the design of both new subjects in the School of Early Childhood at QUT.

#### *The Personal Connection.*

From the student surveys, it was suggested that one of the powerful qualities of stories, particularly first hand stories of practice, was the intimate connections that existed between the teller, the listener and the story itself. (Connelly and Clandinin (1990) call this 'connected knowing'.) The students claimed that because the teller was personally known to them, the story acquired a depth of meaning that would not have been possible, had the teller been unknown or anonymous.

From student comments, there could be little doubt that story sharing occurred most in interactive climates where the participants felt relaxed with each other, and a degree of comfort, even intimacy existed. But some story telling also occurred in the unlikely context of a large lecture theatre, where the sharing of stories was seen to bring down barriers between faculty and students, to draw the teller and listeners together. As Chris (a student) pointed out:

"A lecture is such a huge place. Everyone is there. Stories do make it more personal. Otherwise you're just a blob in a sea of faces."

Through story telling, faculty became more 'real' to students who believed they came to know faculty members in a richer, more fully human way. As Chris said:

"Stories make you closer to the lecturers, makes them more human. Otherwise they're just lecturers up there, talking about stuff that they know inside out."

Several faculty members shared this belief in the importance of relatively close relationships with students in order to make meaningful intellectual contact with them: to help them engage with important ideas and stimulate their professional development. To quote one faculty member:

"The minute you get into a story you have been involved in, or you know of someone who has been involved, it puts it on a personal basis and I think a greater proportion of the students are more willing to attend to that, where monologic giving of information, I would guess, tends to be seen not as coming from the person, but coming from the outside, filtered by the person."

It was the personal connection that somehow added intensity to the communication between teacher and learner. These personal stories were able to reach students in a way that more generalized, abstracted, distanced principles often did not. They had a powerful impact on these preservice teacher education students.

#### *On purposes*

In an article titled 'Learning to Teach with Cases', Gary Sykes (1989) suggests that whilst teacher educators may feel it is worthwhile to utilize case studies in their work with students, a well articulated conceptual structure for the use of cases is yet to be developed. The positive attitude towards cases was borne out in the Australian data, with 100% of the faculty respondents indicating that stories were either an 'important' or 'very important' part of their teaching. Also in keeping with the work of Kilbourn (1988) and Sykes (1989) the most frequently mentioned purpose in using stories of practice was that of providing an illustrative example of a major concept. Faculty members believed that through their use of concrete examples, students developed a deeper understanding of what were often rather abstract and complex concepts or principles.

In both surveys and interviews, staff made a number of comments that suggested they saw stories of practice as a 'window on reality', a way to ground theoretical ideas in the particular: to contextualize information. In Leinhardt's (1988:148) terms, a way to provide "situated knowledge" rather than "principled, context-free knowledge". But beyond this, several staff mentioned the use of stories as an integrative device. They perceived that in the mechanics of planning and implementing teacher education programs, teaching had somehow lost its integrity. Teaching had become fragmented and stories of teaching were one way to recover the whole. As one staff member commented:



"A lot of the material we deal with... and the way our subjects are written now, we look at a small piece of a program or a small piece of a teacher. Not 'being a teacher', or 'the role of a teacher'. We look at it strategy by strategy, one by one. And to me a story can be people in context- which in that sense makes it more whole and more real. And hopefully, if we are dealing in bits of information, it will help put that bit of information in a real context- make it more whole." (E.7)

This concern- to maintain teaching as a 'whole' phenomenon, rather than to break it down to a collection of discrete skills or competencies, also characterized the innovatory approaches that were developed in the following year.

This project also examined the values students perceived in story use. These could be categorized into three major areas- firstly the usefulness of story sharing in creating a communication climate that was conducive to learning; secondly, their ability to make content more meaningful and thirdly, the ways in which stories helped students connect with the ideas. It is the last function that will be explored here.

Stories were valued because they were able to create stronger, more personal links between the ideas being conveyed and the students themselves. This was no longer distanced, neutral, abstracted information that you were taking note of because someone told you it was important. This was a form of information that was perceived to be much closer to the self; a form that held personal meaning. Stories enabled the students to imagine themselves in the situation; and to see connections between the ideas and their own experience. Often these connections had an emotional dimension, and many students mentioned the value of learning compassion or empathy through stories of teachers.

Tamir (1991:265) writes: "... a major problem of a novice teacher is to absorb and internalize professional knowledge presented in teacher education courses in such a way that it becomes his or her personal practical knowledge." These students may not have had Tamir's vocabulary, but many seemed to be saying just this: stories were a way of making this knowledge their own.

## *PART 2: New Initiatives at The School of Early Childhood.*

In 1991, in the School of Early Childhood at QUT, a new Bachelor of Teaching program began. Whilst it was accepted that many curriculum subjects would need to be focused on particular content areas such as literacy, maths and the arts, an attempt was made to maintain a more holistic approach at both the beginning and the end of the program. These more integrated subjects were designed to make much greater use of the case study literature and to provide students with an opportunity to make direct contact with teachers in the field: to try to uncover some of their personal meanings of teaching.

### *'Introduction to Educational Practice'*

In this introductory subject, students were taken on short familiarization visits to all the major service types of early childhood education, including child care, community kindergarten, state preschool and early primary classes. After this, they negotiated their own sites for field experience in a broad-range of locations: wherever young children and their parents were to be found. The literature students were exposed to in this 20 credit point subject focused heavily (though not exclusively) on stories about teaching and teachers' own stories. Students were given an extensive reading list and encouraged to read widely. Some of the items listed were recently published educational research documents, in the ethnographic, phenomenological or case study tradition. Some were very practical accounts written by teachers for teachers. Others were classic stories of teaching such as Sylvia Ashton Warner's (1963) *Teacher* and Caroline Pratt's (1970) *I Learn From Children*. There were also historical accounts of teachers and children and biographies of pioneering educators.

To help introduce students to the 'real world' of teachers, practicing teachers from all levels of education, from child care through high school were invited to participate in lectures, to give a personal perspective on their work.

In terms of assessment, there were basically two requirements. Firstly, students had to complete a log book of field visits and observations, and a reflective journal. But the major task for the semester asked students to investigate an aspect of teaching that was of interest to them. To maintain the principles of autonomous learning, students were given a great deal of freedom, but they were also given a great deal of support as they made their choices. At the beginning of the semester, they were given a detailed written document that spelled out the requirements, listed

suggested topics, and included practical guidelines on how to proceed with what was in essence, a small piece of qualitative research. They were required to submit a written proposal for their project and consult with their tutor about their choice of topic. (The majority chose variations from the list provided.) Topics centred on three major areas: Changes in teaching over time (historical perspective); comparisons of approaches to teaching across educational settings; and thirdly, connections between educational practices and the wider society. Students began by carrying out a literature search and compiling a review which was submitted mid-semester. A second consultation occurred at this point and topics were fine-tuned as required. They then interviewed and in some cases observed teachers at work, then prepared a final report of their project that incorporated information from both the literature and the field work.

This was indeed an undertaking for beginning tertiary students, but with support from staff the students completed many interesting projects. Their experiences as they completed this project enriched discussion in tutorials throughout the second half of the semester. It seemed that whatever the topic under discussion, some students had first hand experiences to relate- a rather unusual occurrence with students in their first weeks of teacher education. In one tutorial group alone, projects included a study of two white urban male primary teachers who recently had been transferred to a remote Aboriginal community; a study of teachers' views and practices related to meeting the needs of Aboriginal children in two urban settings- a private school run by an Aboriginal organization and a community preschool that had only a few Aboriginal children enrolled; a study of the different perceptions of preschool and first grade teachers about how to smooth children's transition between the two settings; a study of teachers' views about learning in a first grade and seventh grade classroom; a study of the different views about teaching held by first year graduates and teachers with more than 20 years experience; an exploration of the personal qualities of early childhood teachers valued by parents and professional educators; and an historical study of early childhood education in Queensland from 1940 to the present day, that included the preparation of three oral histories of retired leaders of early childhood education in this state.

This subject has now been offered a second time and on both occasions, has received very positive evaluations from students. Qualitative data gathered from student journals also suggests this subject has provided a worthwhile grounding for future professional development. As one student wrote in her final journal entry:

"Looking back on this semester, the visits, the tutorials, the readings, I can see that teaching in early childhood is a very important and responsible area. We are

teaching the grounding for the children's future.... I have also learned the value of reflection. You must look back, examine what has gone before and be ready to make adjustments. My thinking towards education has changed dramatically. My own education was very rigid and intimidating. I can see the need for flexibility and respect and I think this attitude will deepen in the following semesters. I have learned far more than I ever expected to learn." (Cynthia)

Another student wrote:

"I completed my final project report today and I think the research I did has really helped me in understanding the way early childhood education services have developed.... I find that after I've read different things and really thought about the information, it falls into place and suddenly you can understand why things are the way they are." (Juliet)

She went on:

"It was good to be reassured that a teacher "starts with answers and ends with questions" as I feel that is exactly what I have done. When I first entered the course, I think I had the idea that there would be a formula that you would base your teaching on! Now I know that there is no one correct way of teaching, but many different combinations. That's one thing I like about teaching, that it is up to me to make the choices and hopefully come up with the best solutions.... I didn't expect this subject to raise so many questions and to have such latitude. I think it is only through such questioning and examination that [I] can begin to form some ideas about teaching: what it is and how I might fit into it." (Juliet)

### *'The Integrated Curriculum'*

The subject devised by Gail Halliwell shared many of the same theoretical bases as the introductory subject, but it occurred at the opposite end of the program. It was designed to help students reflect on their experiences and learning throughout the program and to provide a bridge into the professional world of teachers' work. Once again, the concern was for students to come to understand teaching as a complex phenomenon, embedded in a particular social context.

This subject utilized the same basic reading list as did the introductory subject and similarly, invited practitioners on campus to share some of their insights with students. However, more time was made available to each practitioner and the guidelines they were given paralleled information

provided to students. The practitioners were asked to talk about significant events in their lives that had impacted on them and helped make them the teacher they were today. They were exposed to Clandinin's (1986) notion that personal practical knowledge is a 'coalescence of experience' and asked to describe some features of their own personal practical knowledge. They were also asked to describe their images of themselves as teachers and to talk about the 'big ideas' that guided their actions as teachers.

Once again, students were empowered to select the focus of their assessment, though at this level it was not deemed necessary to provide the same safety net of proposal writing and regular scheduled meetings with a staff member during the process.

One of the major assessment items in this subject was a piece of narrative research and it is on this task that I wish to focus attention. Students were asked to write a teacher's story, using any genre they wished, as long as it included a self-reflective dimension. The students' responses to this very open-ended task were mixed. Initially, some students thought this task would be 'a piece of cake', but they quickly found otherwise. Others were frankly puzzled by it, because this group of students had encountered nothing like it in their programs to date. Some welcomed it and saw it as an opportunity to really make contact with the world of the practicing teacher.

Of the total class group of 140, 34 students voluntarily made available their teacher stories and analysis of these is still underway. As might be expected, the analysis is not concerned so much with the details of the teachers' lives portrayed in the stories, but is searching for insights on the students' understandings of teaching and their reflections on themselves as emerging early childhood teachers.

Narrative research has a long tradition both within and outside of education and as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) among others, have pointed out, we all lead stories lives. We draw upon personal narratives to make sense of what we encounter in the world and we inhabit each other's stories in reflexive ways. These students were discerning the teachers' story- that person's ways of 'experiencing the world' of teaching (Connelly and Clandinin 1990:2) but at the same time, they were living their own story- observing their own experience as they created the story.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990:9) highlight the difference between a simple annal or chronicle that tries to objectively record the events that occur and a narrative, which is enriched by the

documentation of the meaning, significance or connection between those events. At the surface level of the annal, the students' stories certainly indicated that they had learned much about what their teachers did and espoused through this exercise.

In the students' words about teaching it seemed they did appreciate the complexity of the work. Their stories displayed a high level of empathy with the teachers that was most unlike the often-harsh criticisms leveled by novices towards experienced practitioners, when they perceive the experienced teacher is not acting in a manner they have come to see as 'correct'.

But of course as the writer and the teacher work collaboratively to create a story, the writer not only comes to understand the teacher better, the writer comes to understand him herself in new ways. To use a metaphor- it is as if the writer is holding up a mirror. What is framed in the mirror is not only a portrait of the teacher-subject, but also an image of the writer. The story reflects both images. In the words of one student:

" As I listened to Beth, I heard my own experiences and values, my own frustrations and expectations for the future."

Through this experience, these student writers appeared to find enhanced understandings of themselves as emergent teachers. Many reported a strong sense of identification with the teacher they worked with- there was a sense of connection with the beliefs and actions of the practitioner.

Interestingly, a substantial number of students also seemed to have a new sense of the trajectory of their own professional development into the future. They no longer wrote of becoming a teacher as if it were a single-step process; something that occurred instantaneously as one 'got out' of a preservice program. Their view of professional development had expanded into the long term. To quote some examples:

A student wrote:

" After talking to Sue, I realize the distant ideal and goal I hold of myself as a sensitive child-centered teacher, will not emerge overnight, but must evolve over time and through experience."

Another wrote:

"My abilities and capabilities will only strengthen as I grow and mature as a teacher and teach a class of my own."

As teacher educators know, the final year of a preservice program can be a time of heightened anxiety for students. Often they are overly conscious of all they do *not* know and their self confidence can be at a low ebb. One of the beneficial outcomes from this exercise was a marked lessening in the students' anxiety about their preparedness to adopt the teacher's role in the near future. After describing her teacher's use of resources, one student added:

"This idea of using life around us as a major resource gives body to my limp self image as a teacher."

Another began her story as follows:

"Will I cope? Do I really know what I am doing? Can I be responsible for 25 children? Will they like me? Will they learn from me? One month ago, these were the questions I was continuously thrashing around in my mind. Today those questions are still present, but with the understanding that my colleagues are asking those same things and more importantly, so too are those now successful teachers."

Many parallels were found between these students' stories and the earlier data on students' perceptions of the worth of stories. The power of story-sharing to build strong personal connections between the participants- to help them come to know about teaching in a much more personal, more fundamental way once again emerged strongly. The power of stories- to build shared meaning, to help the novice bond with others in the professional group- to feel you belong and that you do not stand alone- these things emerged with clarity.

#### *Future Directions*

Analysis of the stories is continuing in the following areas. We are asking:

1. What evidence is there that these students now appreciate the inescapable moral dimension of teaching and no longer see it solely as a technical activity?
2. Bearing in mind the importance of significant events in shaping a teacher's personal practical knowledge, what *are* the significant events being described by these teachers and the students themselves?
3. What metaphors of early childhood teaching are being used and how widely shared are these metaphors? How do they relate to existing literature (Russell et al. 1988) on the metaphors of beginning teachers?
4. What are the common value statements given voice by students and is there any evidence that these are more than slogans?

### *Conclusion.*

We still understand so little about the transformation of student into teacher and much of our knowledge about how to effect this transformation remains buried in the tacit knowledge of practicing teacher educators. Through studies that examine the real life practices of teacher education and try to surface the practical knowledge both of teacher educators and students, we may enhance our understandings of this process (Tamir, 1991) and thus improve our ability to support students as they undergo this transformation into early childhood teachers.



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