Introduction: Auto-Ethnography and Action Research

Action research involves an ethical commitment to improving society (to make it more just), improving ourselves (that we may become more conscious of our responsibility as members of a democratic society), and ultimately improving our lives together (building community) (Holly & Kasten, 2001, p. 31)

This paper explores, through the lens of auto-ethonographic action research, how far a child-originated curriculum in a non-traditional primary school meets Queensland state targets for learning in the arts. It also, by virtue of the nature of qualitative and reflexive practice, considers the transformation of both the early career researcher and the school community that is the focus of this research, during the process of gathering data in multiple formats, and through the voicing the owners' viewpoints and experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). 'Bricolage' allows multiple perspectives on a context through 'crystallized' or many-faceted empirical materials (Richardson, 2000) that connect and re-connect to allow a range of perspectives on the research process, the researcher and the research subject. Rejecting the use of 'triangulated' data (Flick, 2006) the researcher co-developed with the school facilitators a means of embodying our shared experience of growth and learning in this newly-founded school. That empirical data in its multiple formats, offers representations of a complex and changing reality. Field notes, researcher 'blogs', notes on constructive conversations between parents, facilitators, students and the researcher, and video gathered during research visits are supplemented by the documentation gathered by the school's facilitators and through students' own documentation of their learning journeys. In a metaphorical sense, this multi-faceted approach to action research is the multiple-voiced 'Internet' in contrast to the 'Chronological Documentation' of researcher gathered data alone, incorporating both subject and object through

> …activity theory in which subject and object are already explicitly included in the ontology. Activity theory focuses on practical actions and investigates their mediated nature and embeddedness in systems rather than in the heads of people. Because reflexivity and subjectivity are performed, activity theory is an appropriate way of framing doing research, writing research, and reading research. (Roth Wolff-Michael & Breuer, 2003)

Hence, this paper also seeks to reflect the researcher's experience as she endeavours to make sense of a constantly changing environment: a 'Coral Reef of Learning' that incorporates students' learning, and the learning of all adult participants in this community school. Learning is expressed through diverse viewpoints, focuses and meanings that incorporate both the researcher and stakeholders' journeys and their transformations through experience.

This action research project seemed simple at the outset, but every step in the research journey has presented, and continues to present, challenges. These have included locating myself in both 'text and context' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Finding a means to

represent and interpret the phenomena observed and documented by various means, has meant constantly revisiting the values and assumptions I bring to the research and to my work as an educator. That process has evolved through professional conversations with the school facilitators, and through writing as research (Richardson, 2000). A direct result of that exploration has been a shift in my perspective, from an early perception that my role was one that required 'consultation' with the school community, (positioning self-as-researcher in conversation with community as 'other') to a sense of belonging to that community. I now identify with, and am identified by others as 'belonging' as a stakeholder in the school community (Adler & Adler, 1995). This has required a concomitant shifting of my voice as ethnographer from observer analyst and reporter, to critical friend, creative participant, stakeholder and learner. The school facilitators, John and Meg and the community of parents and children are also very much co-constructors and co-owners of this research as practitioners in the field of non-traditional education.

Note: All stakeholders involved in the research project approved both the use of subsitute names and the content of this paper.

Background: The Magic Gardens School and Research Project

The Magic Gardens School is a non-traditional private community school in rural Queensland. It opened in January 2006. The school community shares a vision for the school which embraces elements of Reggio Emilia, Montessori and Waldorf/Steiner philosophies for a holistic and child-led curriculum. Almost all of the students have been unhappy in traditional school settings, exhibiting behaviours that have led their parents to seek a child-centred educational environment which values play and creative expression as a tool for learning (Eisner, 2005).

Unlike a state school where relatively homogenous groups of children (by age and ability level) are engaged in teacher-facilitated activities, at the Magic Gardens School children move freely like small fish on a *'coral reef of learning'*, absorbed in their own projects (Gardner, 1991). This community school is now in its third term, with around 30 enrolments and with two full-time facilitators (John and Meg) and those parents/guardians who are able to and wish to be actively engaged in the children's learning (Turner & Krechevsky, 2003). The school encourages parent, facilitator, older child, invited expert, and environment as teacher. Increasingly for me as researcher, this gives rise to questions about the value of my work in preparing pre-service teachers for 'teaching', especially in the context of play-based-learning in this school at ages beyond the early years: early signs are that learning occurs without formal teaching.

While many of the parents have a strong belief in the philosophy and values of the school, others are doubtful and 'test' the experience through their children, an expression of doubt demonstrated by Robert Gilman in his account of his own son's learning in a non-traditional school. In his interview with John Holt, a leading proponent of 'unschooling' (Stager, 2002) Gilman gives an account of the contradictory feelings of parents who seek a child-centred school, yet bring expectations and values from 'traditional' school environments to bear upon play-based learning. The Magic Gardens School features a learner-derived and community facilitated approach (R. S. New, 2000) with
- The role of the environment-as-teacher,
- Children's multiple symbolic languages,
- Documentation as assessment and advocacy,
- Long-term projects or progettazione,

- The teacher as researcher, and
- Home-school relationships

These are critical features of the communal life of the school as is children's learning from one another.

One parent describes the research school as 'Free-range organic learning', making explicit the comparison that his child's experience of learning is different from that of children in many other private and state-run Queensland Schools, where learning is more or less formally controlled. A concern for me as researcher is not whether one system is better than another, but whether schooling approaches such as the one adopted by this school can survive in times where state controls of teaching and learning require that schools standardise and report on children's performance nationally.

A Coral Reef of Learning: 'Trust the Child'

The Magic Gardens School day allows children and parents to come and go at will. Each child defines his or her own curriculum with the facilitation of John and Meg and with skilled input from parents, the researcher and other visiting arts practitioners as well as the children's learning from older children and their environment. The school environment offers partially-cleared woodland, with rain-parched open fields and scrubby trees on one side and a shaded rainforest creek and waterfall reached by a winding path into a gulley on the other. The single storey brick and glass buildings sit at the top of the incline, with open and airy spaces, large windows and doorways creating a seamless flow between indoors/outdoors. Small adjoining buildings provide spaces for students to engage in projects, to read or to play in peace.

The school's motto is 'Trust the Child', reflecting John Holt's respect for the child's wisdom and engagement in learning (Gilman, 1984). Holt's view that the ideal educational system would be

> …a society in which knowledge was widely free and widely and freely shared, and children were everywhere trusted, respected, safe, valued, and welcomed,

> finds a home in this school where the child is seen as

> … capable, competent and self-directed. Children build their knowledge from their own action, and interaction, with others. Indeed, the quality of the emotional, social and intellectual relationships children have with each other and with adults lies at the heart of their development in all spheres (Stager, 2002).

The Magic Gardens Research Project

The early vision was that a stakeholder community consisting of primary school children, their teachers and parents, a small group of university undergraduate student volunteers from Arts and Education courses, and myself as researcher would plan and create a community garden for the arts (The Magic Gardens Project) over a 9 month period. All phases of planning and development of that project would be filmed by myself as researcher or by undergraduate students, with copies of 'raw' film data to be reviewed and approved as content for final editing by the school community. On completion and launch of the garden, four groups would each edit the raw film data to create their 'story' of the

project. The stakeholders would benefit as shared owners of the research process (Holly & Kasten, 2001) and as co-creators of a garden that would be both an artistic product in its own right and a rich environment supporting ongoing creative and artistic development for the community. The digital narratives of that experience would form the raw data for analysis of 'talk' (van Manen, 1988) both verbal and non-verbal and for my reporting of findings (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, 2000; Heath & Hindmarsh, 2000). Post-launch of the garden in September 2006, it is envisioned that the school-researcher-university relationship will mature with ongoing co-operation between the existing and new stakeholders supported by regional development initiatives. Future plans include the provision of arts workshops by university undergraduates and local community members, enriching the lives of pupils, teachers and the community of parents. The vision remains that, post research, the 'Magic Garden' will continue to be a place of wonder and enjoyment, owned by the community, and supporting the development of new arts/evironmental projects. At best it will position the school as a potential leader in the creation and use of natural and community-created environments for the arts and learning.

That early vision and intentions were transformed in the crucible of a truly child-centred school, something outside my previous experience as an educator. Filming shifted from my control to be shared by the children who wished to film and offer their views on what they saw happening during their time at the school. The resulting raw film data is richer, less controlled than I had envisaged, and offers offers multiple perspectives on 'The Magic Gardens Project'. The adult student helpers chose not to use digital filming preferring to engage in drama activities, and concerned that the camera presented a barrier between themselves and the children. In this way I was confronted with my own preconceptions about the process of film gathering which brought the realisation that there could not be a 'single version of the film' created by 'the children', as each child had his or her unique perspective on the experience. It now seems unlikely that all of the children will wish to be engaged in video editing. While the school community may still choose to create one or more film versions from the original raw film, the raw film itself, rather than the individual edits or narratives will be analysed to yield data for research into the ways in which learning occurs in a play-based environment.

At the outset I had considered that working with an independent alternative school would prove 'easier' than engaging a state school in the same project. This was because of the researcher's preconceived ideas concerning likely conceptual fit between her understanding of the nature of constructivist approaches to teaching and those used in the research school. However, the nature of the school presented unique challenges, the most obvious being that The Magic Gardens Project itself was transparently an 'adult agenda', intended to fit with the researcher's timelines. Fortunately, the nature of the school allows discussion and negotiation of 'directions that the project might take based on observations of the children and past experience' (Glassman & Whaley, 2000). Children do not naturally elect to create a garden for the arts, and a garden cannot be hurried. The free-flowing nature of children's learning in this school brought an uncomfortable awareness that the researcher had presented an adult construct and world view whose timelines and outcomes did not 'sit comfortably' with the children's view of the world.

As I have become more accepting of the pace of a child-defined and community supported project, there has been a transformation in my thinking and in the way the community has accepted me. While the project was initially understood as 'something Janice does' this has gradually changed as the community has taken ownership of planting and maintaining the vision of a garden for the arts in a hostile environment. Now, 9 months

into the project, The Magic Gardens Project has become 'something we do' as a community, indicating a shift in ownership. When the children's first effort at planting seedlings was destroyed by hungry wallabies and possums over a weekend in March, the children and Meg created a fence and planted more plants. In this context, no 'teacher' leads the experience, or creates activities that neatly fit state outcomes, although there are certainly rich learning outcomes that can be mapped against Queensland Schools Authority standards. Instead, there are individuals in the community moving like fish on a coral reef, each bringing a unique focus and direction as their interests and engagement in creating a garden ebb and flow, exploring singly, grouping and regrouping, commencing and returning to the project at their own pace (Glassman & Whaley, 2000). This 'natural' and 'creative' approach to learning has run parallel to a shift in my role from 'facilitator/researcher' to that of 'co-learner' in this evolving community: interacting, listening, negotiating and recording on the 'reef of learning'. Here, there are no

> …teacher manuals, curriculum guides, or achievement tests. The lack of externally imposed mandates is joined by the imperative that teachers become skilled observers of children in order to inform their curriculum planning and implementation (R. New, 1993).

To make a garden in such a context meant that, after an initial session during which children painted and discussed their vision of a garden (see Appendix A) the researcher was forced to start the garden the following week, well in advance of her own timelines: digging in unprepared earth in what seemed like 'a good place' to allay the voiced frustration of children who did not want to wait for 'the right time' to plant. This illuminated my unspoken vision that children would be drawn to engage beyond planning to planting and ongoing maintenance to 'own' the garden. As researcher I believe this physical 'digging' with all its attendant risks, being 'in a child's time' rather than within an adult timeframe, is an apt metaphor both for the project and my research. As Rebecca New indicated:

> …projects often move in unanticipated directions as a result of problems children identify. Thus, curriculum planning and implementation revolve around open-ended and often long-term projects that are based on the reciprocal nature of teacher-directed and child-initiated activity. (R. S. New, 2000)

During this early research phase, the learning has been on several fronts. There has been learning for the children as they explore the use of Djembes, paint remarkable murals, film their own experiences, and design and plant the first section of their garden. There has also been real learning for me as researcher, starting from the collision of my expectations for the project and attendent timelines for data-gathering, investigation and reporting, particularly when set against the fluid timelines for child-directed and facilitator supported learning. This has led to an uneasy compromise between different aspects of 'self as participant and self as observer/researcher', in the researcher, and a growing identification with the research and the school experience as a 'coral reef of learning' with all its complexity, changes of pace and different depths.

Documenting Student Learning: The Challenge

One of the challenges of documenting life on a coral reef is its sheer complexity. It is not feasible for the researcher and facilitators to observe and document all the varieties of learning that emerge when children play, explore and experiment freely as individuals. Below is a 'snapshot' of the school at one point in one day. Each day has many such points

documented by John and Meg in their anecdotal and formal recording on a daily basis. These are discussed and analysed retrospectively, in conversations about students' own work and about the film gathered during this research project. Because of the nature of the school and its community, documentation of learning is omnipresent and multi-faceted.

Recording of student learning is proving to be the major challenge to the school community, as the school grows. An example of John's anecdotal recording of the older children's exploration of a map on 2 February 2006 reads:

> 'Peter's projection map of the world. Spent almost one hour discussing projection, relative sizes, continents, world populations, religions, history. Current History – middle east – Israel/Palestine. Henry VIII – Protestant faith/Catholic/Spread of Muslim faith. Karly very knowledgeable – enjoys discussing history. Conker and Karly commencing project on Ancient Greece.'

Screen capture of Conker and Karly from Film Data: 28 March 2006

The above session inspired several weeks of deep learning, with several of the older pupils enthused by the subject, and with younger pupils engaged in parallel learning. As their interest drew them, younger children would 'hover' beside the older students as they engaged in historical research, art work, costume design, and model making, or spent time in discussions about how the ancient Greeks engaged in warfare, choreography of battle, strategy games and design of weapons. Mostly silent, the younger children were fascinated, learning from older children and listening intently, drifting away to other projects, and being captured again later as they passed by.

On my third visit to the school I came to the understanding that it may be necessary to focus on a small number of children as the complexity of 'life on the coral reef of learning' became evident to me. Here are my anecdotal notes indicating the rich diversity of student activity and engagement, and hinting at the difficulties for the school community of documenting and reporting student learning. These notes were gathered during a single hour of one research day.

Free Range Learning - March 2006: Anecdotal Record

Four of the older boys are sitting at an outdoor table with John, the facilitator. Two boys are playing cards with John while another two boys painstakingly decorate tiny action figures for their strategic battle game in full flow in their 'den'. Superboy aged 5 has the videocamera, and moves between this group and a group of girls who are drumming,

dancing and painting a large fabric hanging.

Conker aged 11 years is reading on the settee, deeply engrossed in his book on Roman history. He has asked his mother (for the first time ever) if he can go to the library to find more books on the Romans tonight. Hank (aged 9) is setting up a combat scenario, placing metal figures on a 'landscape' created by Hank and two peers. Hawky (aged 11 years) sits beside Hank, painting his collection of Roman figurines with great care. As he paints he talks with the researcher, explaining the titles of the different Roman ranks and their roles. He and Hank have created a 'Ballista' (a massive war machine using the mechanism of a catapult) out of paddle pop (lolly) sticks and elastic. As he paints and engages in conversation about Roman history, Hawky makes humorous comment on Superboy's very convincing 'media style documentary approach' as the younger child films the girls who are busy painting. Three girls are painting a 15 foot fabric hanging, using fluorescent paint. They have earlier drawn around each other on the cloth creating outlines of dancing figures, and they are now using droplets of paints like stars to outline their own shapes and 'wild hair'. They discuss whether to hang the fabric in the garden and decide to do so.

As he paints, Hawky interjects in Superboy's documentary with a comment or suggestion for the film. John plays cards with two of the older boys, sitting outside at a table in the shade beside Hawky and Hank. As a group they make plays on words, tell jokes, argue about number relationships and discuss their plans for the week.

During the quiet conversation Rob discusses with John how he can make the transition to secondary school next year. He is concerned that although he enjoys playing and is happy at the school, he needs to be able to keep up with his peers when he starts secondary school. After discussion with John, Rob decides he will spend Wednesday at play, and spend Thursday working on number so that he can cover what he needs to know.

At all times 'Flow' is evident in the level of concentration during rule-bound games such as cards or chess, or in the students' own self-determined and self-paced projects. The intensity of focus suggests to me that Csikszentmihalyi's description of a 'self-contained universe where everything is black and white' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) may be the normal mode of being for students who are allowed to learn through play. The difference is that these children are older, but play is the consistent feature in their learning.

Lizzie and Miranda (indigenous girls) lead a dance and Superboy follows them mimicking their dance with care. Elbows and knees snapping, arms and hands snaking to the floor at the same time, the girls both embody and become the emu as it pecks for food. The three children dance to a rhythm created by two other children who are playing Djembes and Tambours. They do not question the suitability of the instruments or the Arabic rhythm for an indigenous 'food gathering' dance, unselfconsciously incorporating the rhythms and movements in a cultural fusion.

I am dragging scrub and trimming branches, clearing space for what I hope will eventually become a sandpit, performance area and vegetable garden. The students mapped out those three 'essential items' in their mural design of an 'imagined Magic Garden' the previous week. There is no pressure for any child to become involved in creating the garden: I work quietly, and children drift past, or join in to help as their interest directs them. Miranda moves in to work alongside me, climbing into a low tree and clipping off branches with garden shears. Here, the environment is teacher, and 'Trust the child means not 'telling her to be careful' but ensuring that she is comfortable handling the tools. Unfamiliar with this approach, I find myself trying to hide my nervousness as she works the blades, but relax as I see she is using them with great care. The conversation between us evolves around how Miranda can tell if a twig is alive or not.

In clearing the branches several interesting insects are revealed. We talk about how to avoid startling a snake, as there are brown snakes in this region. Chantelle aged 6 screams at the sight of mating stick insects. Chelsea and Danielle, aged 5 and 6 years old, run across the grass to see what the fuss is about. After discussing and touching the insects, observing that the two stick insects are mating, but that the fluffy eggs tucked into a fold of rotting wood nearby are not connected to the event, the children return to their earlier projects.

Miranda continues making a puppet theatre for a show later that day. Danielle returns to Djembe playing. Chelsea climbes back up and nestles in the branches of a tree, reading the book she left there.

Superboy has now moved away from the older boys' discussion, deciding that he is ready to eat lunch. Others, noticing him, go to gather their sandwiches from the fridge and sit outside under the covered deck in the mid-morning sunshine. Danielle shows considerable skill with the Djembe, playing ensemble with Meg and Chantelle who has joined them, while the other children eat lunch on the same bench. The quiet atmosphere is what impresses: there is no rushing, no pushing and shouting, no bells and no demands to listen. The children decide the pace of their own day, and the day unfolds gracefully before us.

Queensland State Approaches to Learning and Assessment

One of the challenges of recording children's learning in this way is in matching their individual activities against Queensland Studies Authority learning outcomes (Queensland Studies Authority, 2002). In a 'standard' school environment, the teacher will plan learning activities to include specific opportunities to achieve learning outcomes in a range of Queensland Studies Authority Key Learning Areas (KLAs). Observation of students' learning through the above anecdotal notes allows mapping of their achievements against learning outcomes for the Arts KLA. The Arts syllabus for primary to year 10 includes 5 conceptual groupings or 'strands'. These are Drama, Dance, Visual Arts, Media and Music. This syllabus was intended by its creators to support the holistic integration of the arts into a connected curriculum, allowing students to acquire 'unique and significant skills and understandings.' (Queensland Studies Authority, 2002) that are transferable to other areas of the curriculum and which support lifelong learning. The recommended approach to assessment of and for learning requires careful recording and reporting of student achievement of learning outcomes (QSCC, 2002). This underpins a quality approach to assessment of 'what learners should know and do with what they know' (QSCC, 2002). The notes below page do not endeavour to indicate achievement across other curriculum areas of achievement such as Studies of Science and the Environment, English or Maths, for which a range of learning outcomes were also demonstrated by students. For the purposes of this research, my focus is upon the Arts strand only. Evidence of achievement of learning outcomes for the Arts was recorded on digital video and gathered from anecdotal notes made by John and Meg and by myself during one hour. Students' achievements during this hour reveal not only the breadth and depth of their engagement in learning, but also the complexity of the task of monitoring and reporting learning in a non-traditional context.

KLAs for which Queensland state schools must report student performance are: English, Mathematics, Health and Physical Education (HPE), Languages other than English (LOTE), Science, Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), and Technology. There has

been no mandatory requirement for private schools to report student performance. State schools have endeavoured to meet the requirements of an outcomes-based approach, supported by extensive state and school professional development programs. Nevertheless, the incorporation of the KLAs into pre-existing systems for teaching and learning has challenged teachers, with reports of an 'overcrowded curriculum' fuelling a tendency to concentrate on English, Maths and Technology KLAs rather than upon the Arts KLA. Teacher anxiety about school and teacher performance is cited as one reason for this.

My preliminary analysis suggests that the QSA core learning outcomes used for the purposes of this research would have been a useful 'yardstick' for indicating performance and subject knowledge in this non-traditional school context. Unfortunately, during the time between data gathering (in February and March 2006) and the final draft of this paper (September 2006), Education Queensland has adopted a new approach to assessment. Rather than using 'outcomes-based' assessment, as shown on below, all schools will be asked to report student performance against criterion-referenced benchmarks during 2007. This change presents significant challenges to non-traditional schools in general, and to those using play-based learning in particular.

Student Achievement of QSA learning Outcomes for the Arts KLA during One Hour of Play-based Engagement, 2006

Student	QSA KLA/OUTCOME
Lizzie: Miranda:	DA1.1 Students use dance components to explore communication through movement. DA1.2 Students demonstrate awareness of self and others when performing. DA2.1 Students select dance components to create movement sequences that communicate feelings, relationships and narratives.
Superboy:	DA1.1 Students use dance components to explore communication through movement.
Conker: Hawky: Hank:	VA3.1 Students design, make and modify images and objects applying elements and additional concepts to construct intended meanings. VA2.3 Students identify elements and additional concepts to interpret images and objects from a variety of cultural and historical contexts.
Rob:	MU2.1 Students aurally and visually recognise and respond to Level 2 core content in music they hear and perform. MU2.2 Students sing a varied repertoire of pentatonic songs and play instruments, individually and with others, in unison and in two parts.

Regarding processes for gathering evidence of student learning in student-driven learning environments, Carolyn Pope Edwards, co-author of 'The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach—Advanced Reflections', comments,

> Formal documentation is usually arranged and prepared by adults, drawing from the
> works of children and the educational process [photographs, texts of discussions,

samples of children's products]. However, children can also contribute to the record-keeping process and to helping keep permanent traces of the educational process. (Stager, 2002)

In line with this approach, The Magic Gardens School engages the students in gathering examples of their own work for display and for recording achievement. Early indicators are that while the child-originated and teacher-framed approach sits comfortably with recommended practices for recording learner achievements in the context of outcomes based assessment (Queensland Studies Authority, 2002) it may be less easily managed where all schools are required to test and report student learning state wide. A child-originated curriculum does not lend itself to the timeframes of national or state testing and reporting.

The growing range of means for gathering and recording student achievement used by the school and the researcher are indicated in Appendix B. The school community is absorbed in the task of finding a means to document and report student learning, not only because of the importance of this task for the community itself, but because of concerns that the school will be judged upon evidence of student learning, in a world where non-traditional schools are required to meet the same reporting standards as all others.

While there was previously no formal requirement for independent schools to report student performance against QSA Syllabus outcomes, independent schools often found the structures useful as a guide for overall planning and reporting to stakeholders. Schools in Queensland have experienced the ebb and flow of changing curriculum and pedagogy initiatives since before the Queensland Schools Authority (QSA) was formed in July 2002 by a merger between three state bodies: the Queensland School Curriculum Council (QSCC), Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (BSSSS) and the Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority (TEPA). A shift away from the 'industrial model' of education (Middleton & Hill, 1996) with fifty-nine Queensland schools piloting the New Basics/Productive Pedagogies/Rich Tasks approach has encouraged those 'traditional' schools to moving away from traditional 'lesson times' and subject boundaries in favour of an integrated curriculum. Schools engaged in meaningful and integrated curricula report not only that time pressure is less of an issue for teaching and learning, but also that the experience of learners is 'more meaningful' (Chalmers, 2000; Eisner, 1991, 1994b; Personal Communication, 2006). However, while some Queensland schools have adopted a range of pedagogical approaches, including problem-based learning, productive pedagogies and new basics approaches, the national concern is that such initiatives has led to increasing inconsistency in methods of assessment and reporting.

'Essential Learnings and Standards' introduced in 2006 are intended to clarify the above pre-existing curriculum structures (Queensland Government, 2006). The essential learnings are described as

…clear statements of what is important for all students to know and be able to do at the end of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. They describe knowledge and understandings, skills, attributes and capabilities. They promote ongoing learning, social and personal competence and participation in a democratic society.

Reporting of Essential Learnings with testing of all students at 3, 5, 7 and 9 will be mandatory for both state and independent schools from this year. Whereas, previously, private schools were able to 'opt out' of school cohort testing and reporting, where parents voiced strong views against testing, early signs are that there is no similar flexibility in the

new state approach. For schools such as the research school this has profound implications for the child-centred curriculum, for reporting of achievement, and for the future status of this independent school. It seems increasingly likely that he school's students will be required to sit standard tests in line with state schools, where teachers are encouraged to 'teach to the test'. According to one Queensland teacher,

> 'With the pressure from parents and the media, the main emphasis is on literacy and numeracy. Something's (the Arts) got to go.' (Personal Communication, 2006)

Change is a feature of the macro-environment as much as in our micro-environment on the 'coral reef of learning'. New state requirements for reporting achievement will impact upon this newly-established school by the time this paper is published.

Concluding Comments

This research has been undertaken in conditions of rapid change, both at a micro and macro level. Running parallel to the challenges for this newly established school in documenting student learning in a play-based environment, has been my experience on the 'Yellow Brick Road' of action research (Holly & Kasten, 2001). As a researcher I have striven to beware of the tendency for my own received ideas about the nature of education to transfer to this research. I was confronted at an early stage with my own beliefs that 'teachers' would take ownership of project with 'groups' of pupils to create a garden, which might allow me as researcher a degree of distance from which to observe and document all phases of the research (Roth Wolff-Michael & Breuer, 2003). These attitudes were revealed during the processes of action research in this alternative school setting. The reality has been confronting (Eisner, 1991; Gardner, 1999; Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Webber, 2004) as I came to understand that despite a process of narrative inquiry and exploration of change in action (Alvermann, 2000) this did not necessarily anticipate or make easier my transitioning of theory to 'real world' contexts (Airasian, 1997; Barone & Eisner, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Eisner, 1991, 1994a). This research experience has had a three-way impact: firstly upon my own consciousness and frames of reference (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996), secondly upon my interaction with the school community, and thirdly upon my work as an educator of teachers. My initial objectification of 'the project as object' only delayed the 'rigorous examination of a single situation', defined by Griffiths and Davies (1995). Repositioning the researcher's 'self as object' for analysis has required analytical focus in order to facilitate the reporting of perceived 'truths'.

That process has been supported by the school facilitators. On each visit John and Meg would 'greet me' and this ostensibly 'informal meeting' time had multiple functions: social welcome, consciousness-raising activity, transition from 'linear operational thinking' as defined by my university role, to 'child-time'. As co-owners of the research process we are now consciously using 'talk' for orientation into the pace and values of the school and it has become part of a larger and ongoing professional conversation (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

> The possibilities for reflective awakenings and transformations are limited when one is alone. Teachers need others in order to engage in conversations where stories can be told, reflected back, heard in different ways, retold, and relived in new ways. (p. 13)

This increasing awareness of multiple layers of meaning in this early research has supported my shift of research focus from teaching and learning with its connotations of

'observable artefact', to the less comfortable area of 'practice on the ground' (Griffiths & Davies, 1995) with its more ambiguous nature. I no longer expect to capture 'the exact truth about a particular situation' (p. 195) and this has changed my early intentions for research. Consciousness of the impact of my own values and role in the community (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) has led to a reframing of my beliefs about the meaning, processes and products of education (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Eisner, 1991). The use of writing for self-exploration using a personal research blogsite in which I explore and argue the separate voices which emerge within myself during research, has also proved a revealing experience. Because much of that writing may allow recognition of the school or individual student identities, it cannot be shared in this context for ethical reasons.

Students in this non-traditional school are creating rich personal curricula through their play. My plans to report how far those curricula could meet Queensland Studies Authority Targets have been challenged not only be the nature of the 'Free Range Learning Environment' but also by rapidly changing government imperatives concerning the reporting of student achievement. Ironically, while this school has adopted a non-traditional approach to learning, the QSA syllabus with its thoughtfully defined KLAS and broad approaches to reporting outcomes may have provided a more meaningful resource for documenting, assessing and supporting both learner and school performance for this new venture than the framework provided by the Essential Learnings. As a researcher, and as a critical friend of the school, I hope to revisit this topic in a years' time, to review the changing status of assessment and reporting in the school and to document the impact of state required reporting on the child-centred curriculum.

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Appendix A

Children's Paintings and Commentary on their Magic Garden

Chantelle joins the researcher, who is drawing a garden with a stage and musical instruments. Chantelle adds to the researcher' sketch of seats or steps for a stage area and outline of bushes. When asked about her picture, above, Chantelle describes;

'Someone playing music….that's a windchime…and that's a tree with apples on it…that one too…and that's the beautiful sandpit and a picnic table and the beautiful grass all around it.'

Conker quietly joins the younger children as they paint. He spends some time carefully painting two trees with a smiling face immediately above them. When asked what he has painted, he describes his Magic Garden

'This is my idea…..and this is an apple tree…and this is a tree in Autumn with red and yellow leaves and a smiley face.'

Appendix B

Recording Student Learning

Chelsea's Magic Gardendesign.	Chelsea and Danielle painting the hanging.	Lizzie, Conker, Bert and Miranda painting their Magic Garden designs.

School Community
Anecdotal records by JOHN and MEG – daily notes on student, researcher and adult community learning and engagement gathered and annotated by facilitators. Children's work and self-assessment: Installed displays Verbal explanations of work in progress Role-plays and scripts Video production Movement sequences and dance Installed spaces and displays of paintings Research projects into Roman and Greek history, soundwaves Video production and recording Questioning led by facilitator or student, oal/ written work Whole and small group discussion Parent feedback/Child feedback on film Children's own version of the film story (Editing and restorying of raw film – gathered by researcher) Children's own narratives of events or responses to worksheets

Adult Student Community
 Visual (digital film) adult students' personal anecdotal records Written and visual observations of student, adult student, facilitator and community behaviours. Editing/restorying of raw film gathered by researcher. Analysis of still photographs.

Researcher
Personal Blog – critical self-analysis (self as researcher) – project as learning journey Editing/restorying of raw film gathered by researcher Interviews and transcripts of interviews Interviews with John and Meg, parents and guardians, adult students