

Confronting the Snake in the Garden of Community Engagement: A School and University Partnership for Sustainability

Janice K. Jones

University of Southern Queensland

Janice K. Jones
Faculty of Education
University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba, QLD 4350

Tel: 46 312349
Email: jonesja@usq.edu.au

Paper to be considered for the e-journal

Confronting the Snake in the Garden of Community Engagement: A School and University Partnership for Sustainability

Keywords: community engagement, third space, school, trust, boundaries

In the global context of small school closures and a worldwide trend towards larger schools with highly structured curricula, this paper documents an exciting but tentative and vulnerable effort to create a quality and sustainable partnership between a small community school in rural Australia and a university faculty of education. A university lecturer and pre-service teachers work with a non-traditional community school to create a garden for the arts, a short-term project that evolves into a long term partnership. An increasingly interdependent community of school-and-university engage in a shared struggle to defeat the metaphorical snake in their garden of sustainable community engagement: the school faces closure. The boundaries, ontologies and philosophies of school and university become fluid, creating a third space in which trust and rapport evolve into a quality partnership. Third space is the conceptual lens through which the interactions and increasing interdependence of community school and university are observed and documented over a 27 month period during which the community school is established, relationships of mutual trust between school and university grow, and the partners strive against increasing government opposition to ensure the school's survival. When the school's license is withdrawn leading to the closure of the school this seeming defeat brings a new phase of community partnership. Parents take ownership of the process, recognizing their individual and shared strengths as providers of their children's education through home schooling in a supportive community.

It is inevitable that partnerships between universities and communities meet points of transition, with these occurring most dramatically where the interpolation of state demands lead to a change in the power relationships, degrees of identification and sense of ownership felt by participants. In this study, those points of transition evolve around state interventions in a non-traditional rural school with fewer than 30 children, culminating in the closure of the school and subsequent growth of an entirely parent-led and community supported initiative for the children's education.

This paper explores the changing spaces and places, in epistemological, social and political terms, of a partnership between a school community and a regional Australian university faculty of education from 2005 - 2008. The meaning of that partnership during three phases generated by interpolating events is explored against the broader context of educational provision and parental power in education worldwide. The experience of this community-faculty partnership is unique but also reflects of the experience of other grass-roots and democratic communities locally and internationally. Therefore, the knowledge generated by this school-university partnership has value and meaning on a macro level for other communities.

This paper documents, through first person narratives, the lived experience of a community of children, parents and school facilitators supported by researcher and university student participation over a three year period. These narratives allow a mapping of the study across time, space and place, through multiple voices, reflecting the

authentic but changing nature and hegemonies of community and faculty as separate and conjoined partners.

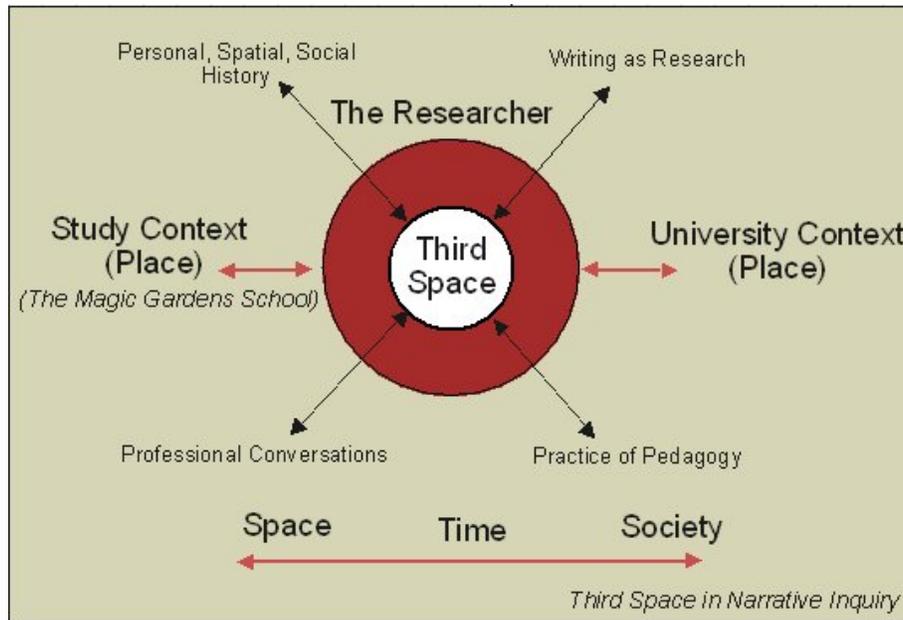


Figure 1: Third Space in Narrative Inquiry (Jones 2008)

For me as researcher and participant in this study, professional learning takes occurs in and between the places of this partnership: non-traditional school and university contexts and their respective epistemologies as shown in figure 1. This generates a third space as described by Allen (1999), the locus of impermanency and transition between more fixed contexts. In this third space my self beliefs and practice of pedagogy are informed by professional conversations with colleagues in both places, and challenged by repeated transitions between school and university with their different epistemological frameworks. Through inhabiting and being inhabited by liminal space over three years, this has generating uncertainty for me as researcher and teacher. My narrative inquiry into data gathered during the study allows an examination of the impact of my personal and hegemonic practices and those of others in community school and university.

Knowledge generation and professional learning impacts not only upon me as researcher, but shifts outwards informing my work and relationships in both places.

Narrative inquiry into a bricolage of data gathered during the study reveals my early beliefs regarding community engagement through reflections, and records of professional conversations. Implicit in those early reflections is my belief of that time that community engagement could be experienced from a detached position, managed as a *project* with a scope and timeline defined by university funding and with myself in the role of project manager. That detached position was revealed as naïve and impracticable even in the early stages of community engagement, as a genuine partnership began to evolve.

Reflexive praxis on and in the experience of community education has also challenged me to re-examine my position as a constructivist teacher, revealing my reliance upon the power structures of schools and teaching. Professional conversations between parents, facilitators and university participants have challenged the community to consider our shared understandings of personal power and agency in education, and our relationships one to the other. Even in this parent-run community school, despite all efforts by facilitators to encourage parental engagement, the context encouraged parents to rely upon perceived teacher-experts for the education of their children. Only the closure of the school disrupted those relationships requiring parents to own and acknowledge their power as educators. In that sense, the closure of the school has led to a positive outcome.

At the time of writing, unresolved financial and legal concerns impact upon the community and the facilitators who have therefore stepped back from the opportunity to be named as co-writers and presenters of the study at this stage. Nevertheless, John and Meg, who have chosen pseudonyms for anonymity, and parents and children of The Magic Gardens School which is the community context of this study, remain co-generators of knowledge and co-owners of this research. All have shared in the co-construction of this paper and its underpinning data.

My use of narratives of experience as a tool for authentic representation of communities of engagement is modeled on the work of Alvermann (2000), Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Richardson (2000), in its use of recursive writing by the researcher and community as a team as modeled by Stewart (1997). This allows the co-generation of a neo-narrative of shared experience, and checking of authenticity through ongoing professional conversations. A neo-narrative belongs to neither place nor agent, but is generated in and generates a third space: a new and hybrid identity, voice and vision. In this study, the neo-narrative is generated by the school community of facilitators and parents, voiced through my recursive writing in this and other papers, and agreed for publication by the community.

This paper is structured around 4 sections:

Part 1: The Global Context: Small School Closure and Parental Disempowerment

Part 2: The Community Engagement Context: The Epistemology of Place

Part 3: Three Phases of a Community Partnership: Power, Ownership and Narratives of Engagement

Part 4: Scholarship of Engagement: A Neo-narrative

This paper was drafted at the time of the school's imminent closure, and adjusted to reflect the outcome of government decisions. Hence, the timing of the paper carried a potential risk for community members who stepped back from named co-authorship or presentation of this paper as they were anxious to avoid a negative impact upon pending decisions regarding repayment of funding, or upon those families who intended to home school their children. Following the closure of the school in late February 2008 John and Meg are awaiting the outcome of their challenge to decisions that threaten them with financial losses similar to those experienced by the community of the Boorobin Sudbury School which operated for 7 years in Queensland, and where an unsuccessful legal campaign against state closure led to catastrophic financial losses (Sheppard, 2004).

Part 1: The Global Context: Small School Closure and Parental Disempowerment

The idea that parents might have more to offer a school than P&C membership, fundraising and listening to children read occasionally, is not an idea that usually garners support among teachers. (John's notes for this paper, May 2008)

We express our concern and dismay over the treatment of the school, its staff, students and parents by the Queensland State Government, and its agents by, at the very least, overzealous, inflexible inspections and demands, inadequate research, ineffective listening, inaccurate reporting, not taking the views of children, parents and teachers into consideration, that have led to high financial costs and losses, the forced sale of the School's campus, and the diversion of school resources away from this democratic School's core business of supporting students' learning and preparation for life. (Sheppard, 2004)

Amberley State School was 145 years old last year. The State Government intends to close it at the end of 2008 due to the expansion of the Amberley Defence Base (Amberley School Community Action Group, 2007)

The impact of government closures of small, rural, special, religious and non-traditional schools is documented in Australia Bureau of Statistics (2006a) and media reports (Weston, 2008) but is yet to be researched and reported on a macro level. Anecdotal evidence from websites, petitions and news articles indicates a groundswell of community anger at a lack of consultation in school closures and their impact upon children's futures. Small school closures have met with parental opposition worldwide 'reflecting the value of the school as a focal point in the local community' (Curry, 2003, p. 84).

Marshall (2006) and Baillie (2008) reported that in Victoria and other states, shifting populations impact upon school numbers, and the closure of rural schools has also led to undocumented numbers of closures of non-traditional, special and religious schools Australia-wide. The impact of these changes upon parental choice and students' educational experience is reflected on a micro level in this study, where this non-traditional community school was closed early in its third year. This community partnership is therefore important as a barometer of wider social trends, with closures and mergers of small, rural and non-traditional schools leading to significant social and educational impacts worldwide.

Between 1940 and 1990 the population of the United States increased by 70% according to Mitchell (2000) but over the same period 238,000 schools closed. Although that trend

has recently been reversed in the United States, rural schools in Europe and Australia are progressively being closed and merged into 'super schools' (Skelton, 2006), requiring rural children to travel to urban schools.

Community opposition to small school closures is strong. The closure of a quarter of West Virginia's state schools since 1990 led to law suits against the state by parents whose children were required to spend more than 12 hours per week on buses (Mitchell, 2000) with negative impacts upon students' personal and social wellbeing, upon parental representation on school boards, and involvement in children's schooling. The trend is global: between 1967 and 1977 two-thirds of schools in Ireland were run by a single teacher or two-teachers, but by 1997 that figure had dropped to one quarter.

Small schools have been rationalized on financial grounds, with state arguments also citing small schools' inability to provide the breadth of curriculum available in larger schools. However, these justifications are increasingly challenged by researchers (Caldwell, 2005; Greenfield, Porritt, Leach, Bowlby, Brighthouse, Brookes, Dunford, Rowe, Pullman, & Wilson, 2006 ; Leue, 1992) and parents (Carbonell, 2004) who cite the value of small schools to parents, children and their communities.

Data presented in support of small school closure has found the economies of scale and improved academic value used as justification for closure rarely eventuate, and that small school closures are made on the grounds of 'belief systems...rather than data derived from scientific evidence' (Bechtel, 1997, p. 479). In this paper I use Williams' tentative

descriptors of large and small student numbers in primary schools (Williams, 1990) with a large primary school having 400 students and above. Bechtel (ibid) also reported that students in schools with fewer than 300 students scored higher on the Iowa Basic Skills test, and that smaller schools led to greater economies. This finding is supported by Mark Witham of the South Australia Department of Community Services, who draws upon a wealth of data to demonstrate that economic values used in determining closure ignore hidden costs of closures in financial, social and human terms (Witham, 1993). Witham's research indicated a hidden agenda: rapid financial gain generated by the sale of small school real estate, particularly in urban areas with high commercial land values may be the force driving this change.

Larger schools are reported to reduce parental and community involvement, according to Meier (2000), although the threat of closure may lead to a strong and unified parental response, as shown in Chicago parents' response to the Renaissance 2010 project (Woestehoff, 2005) and in this study. Cotton's extensive research indicated a high level of parental involvement in small schools, observing that on most measures small schools are 'superior to large schools' (1996 para. 5).

The trend to build large schools has been directly linked to reduced student engagement (Meegan & Mitchell, 2001; Princiotta & Bielick, 2006; Skelton, 2006; Weston, 2008) and perceptions of juvenile male behaviour as antisocial and destructive as noted by Mercogliano (1998). Student alienation is common in large schools, with evidence that disengagement leads to increased violence in the classroom and broader community

(Conoley & Goldstein, 2004). Negative impacts of large school contexts include a greater incidence of gun-crime and increased bullying and juvenile suicide (Klonsky, 2002). These negative impacts have precipitated a reversal of the trend to larger schools in the United States.

Despite the evidence that large schools negatively impact upon the social and academic performance of poor, ethnic and special needs students and that an increase in schools size has been directly correlated to ‘...loss of belief in the capacity to influence the world’ (Meier, 2000 para. 19), and an increased risk of student violence (Conoley & Goldstein, 2004), Australia continues to merge and close small schools. In 2006 the South Australia premier announced 6 ‘Superschools’ would replace 17 existing small schools by 2011.

The community school in this context, The Magic Gardens school was established by parents seeking a child-paced and family-friendly holistic educational environment (Appleton, 1992) for their children. Plans for the school had been in development since 2001. Parents were seeking an educational environment that did not undervalue or position their child as other (Cannella, 1999), or as a holistic intervention for children who were non-compliant in traditional school contexts (Payne, River-Bento, & Skillings, 2002). In late 2005 parents formed an incorporated body and in January 2006 the school started operation with the leadership of experienced teacher-facilitators John and Meg with 10 enrolments. Two families that had previously home schooled their children welcomed the school as a play based and multi-age learning environment for their

children. This Reggio-Emilia style approach to education, where the curriculum emerges from the child, requires non-traditional teaching methodologies, and greater community and parental engagement than more traditional school contexts. From the outset, therefore, it challenged my practice and philosophy as a teacher educator, and challenged the many university students who visited to provide workshops and teaching support over the years of the school's operation.

Parents seeking non-traditional schools for their children reflect a growing trend worldwide. In 38 states of the USA charter schools (non-traditional independent) school numbers increased between 1990 and 2000 from 4,000 to 112,000 in the state of Minnesota alone, an increase paralleled in other states. In Arizona more than 6% of children currently attend charter schools according to Barr and Parret (1999). The largest growth of schools in Australia in the last five years has been the independent sector (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006b). For many parents, home schooling presents the best option, and a growing number of parents worldwide home school their children with statistics indicating over 50 million children recorded as home schooled in the USA (Princiotta & Bielick, 2006). At the close of this study, with their dreams of a community school dashed, eight families out of the thirteen opted to home school their children. Of the children whose parents could not or did not wish to home school, one child has settled happily into a traditional primary school, but other children have exhibited a return to the anxiety-based behaviours that initially led their parents to withdraw them from traditional school contexts where they were viewed by teachers as 'difficult' children. Of the older children who moved on from the school through natural progression the majority have

accommodated to traditional school contexts and a small number have decided to home school through their teenage years.

Part 2: The Community Engagement Context: The Epistemology of Place and Narratives of Engagement

The Magic Gardens School was established by parents and facilitated by qualified teachers with strong literacy and numeracy backgrounds, and experience in non-traditional contexts such as Steiner schooling (Barr & Parrett, 1999; Gilman & Gilman, 1984; Woods, Ashley, & Woods, 2005). A single-story building in a rural environment, (Figure 2) the school offered a free-flowing indoors/outdoors environment for children, reducing their stress and creating spaces for independent and supported learning.



Figure 2: The community school building

There were no desks, no set times for meals, and no pre-planned curriculum: instead, it was intended that the children would learn through play, supported by facilitators, parents and invited experts who worked with children individually and in groups to enhance and record their learning, mapping learning against state curricula.

In this epistemology the environment is positioned as teacher (Jenkinson, 2001; New, 2003; Stager, 2002) and the flow of play allows children and facilitators to focus upon and record children's projects (Cloke & Jones, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a, 1997b,

2000) in a way that reflects children's timelines rather than in pre-defined units. In addition to the environment and peers, parents were regarded as the first educators, and their ongoing importance in children's learning was recognized by the community. University student teachers and faculty of arts students were regular visitors to the school, and all visitors found their expectations challenged: they were surprised to find that there was little noise, that the children were busily absorbed in their own projects, and that to work effectively in such a context, the facilitator must model a process and wait for children to show interest, or must come alongside a group of children playing, waiting for a signal that they were invited into the play, before offering ideas for development. This highly sensitive process required much more careful observation and listening to children than I had previously experienced: the intensity of focus for me and for student facilitators was exhausting, and we discovered that it was difficult to suppress the teacher voice. Our tendency to use the language and controls of teaching, even in a play-based context became obvious during analysis of 100 hours of film captured by the children, and in professional conversations with peers in the community, despite our best efforts to be child-focused and attentive listeners.

The community school context allowed children to play and move freely, reducing their stress and creating spaces for independent and supported learning. Educators included parents, children's peers, the environment and visiting facilitators. Facilitators included myself in the role arts and literacies advisor and facilitator, with university students and community experts providing expertise in other areas. The home and family were respected as the centre of learning, and the individual child's play evolved a personal

curriculum. During the 1990's John had conducted unpublished research into parental involvement in schools, informing his belief that parents

... have more to offer a school than P&C membership, fundraising and listening to children read occasionally. (John's fieldnotes, 23.05.2008 para 1).

Paradoxically, his findings also indicated that many teachers in his sample regarded a frequent or continuing parental presence in the classroom either challenging or, at worst, intrusive. This community school had a different vision, but John noted his frustration that, despite encouragement parental involvement was limited.

Most parents were content to observe and occasionally become involved with their own or other children... (John's fieldnotes, 23.05.2008 para. 15).

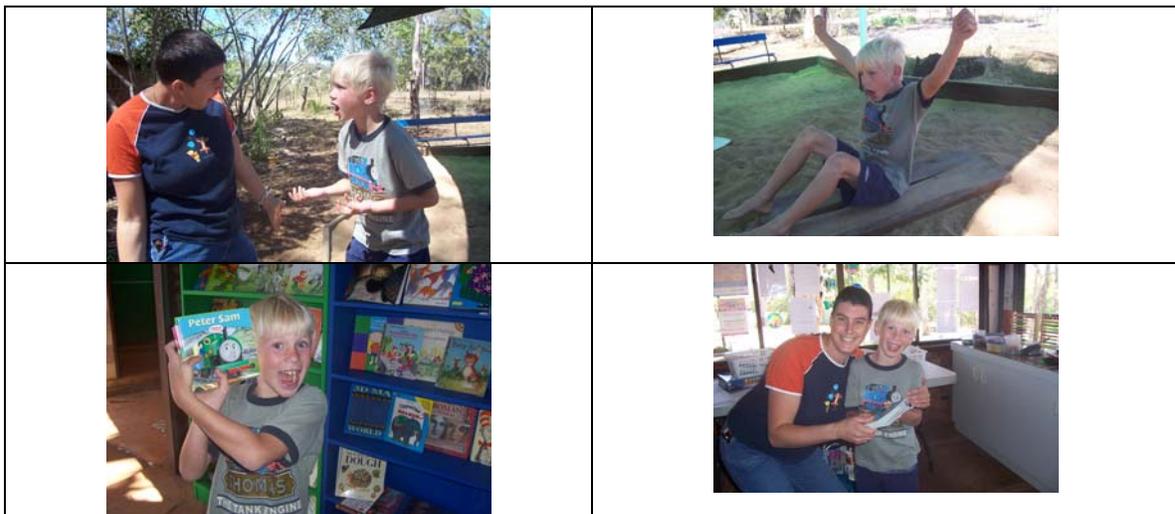


Figure 3: A child parent poses with a non-familial parent for his photo story

Those parents and students who visited were valued as educators, although all found it necessary to take time to adjust, and rethink their beliefs about teaching and learning.

Figure 3 shows a photo-story planned and acted out by a child who had a history of running away from schools prior to his experience in the community school. This was prompted by his experience in a 'superhero' role during a 4 hour walkabout theatre

workshop run by pre-service teachers: a months-long child-driven project was prompted by the faculty's community engagement during one day. Figure 3 shows that the child co-opted a visiting parent to act with him, while Meg took the photographs and John word-processed the narrative dictated by the student. This was a breakthrough for a child who said of himself

'I'm eight, but I'm really five. Something happened when I was born so I am not really an eight year old.' (fieldnotes 28.03.08, para 2). The child's pride in in this self-and-community supported learning experience generated new confidence and a marked increase in literacy skills was evident in his newfound ability to construct and sequence narrative and visual stories. He began to draw and create story books, and to dictate his stories to be typed by facilitators, and then began to copy words onto his carefully created comic books, taking hours over the task. For the community and for me as researcher, this transformation confirmed our shared conviction that this school provided an important alternative for parents and children, to the traditional context where children had been unhappy and failing.

In this context the metaphor of a reptile threatening a community play-based school is an appropriate one. The metaphorical snake in the garden represents an unexpected and dangerous invader in a place of fruitfulness and innocence, carrying with it sub-narratives that include banishment and alienation as punishments for a lack of adherence to rules. As in the metaphor of exile from the garden, there is new growth, albeit in a harsh context. Following the closure of the school, the community and faculty of education partnership continues. The shared knowledge and experience of self-determination gained

during the study by parents and facilitators has allowed 8 out of 13 families to find a way of providing for their children’s education, through home schooling.

Part 3: Three Phases of a Community Partnership: Power, Ownership and Narratives of Engagement

Three phases of the study are indicated in figure 4. Topmost, the grey circles represent the community of parents, children and facilitators. The transparent circles represent my ongoing engagement as participant researcher and that of university pre-service teachers and drama students. The size of the circles represents my perception of the balance of power, autonomy or participation of the groups at each phase as agreed with the facilitators and parents in this study. The arrows indicate the phases of the community experience.

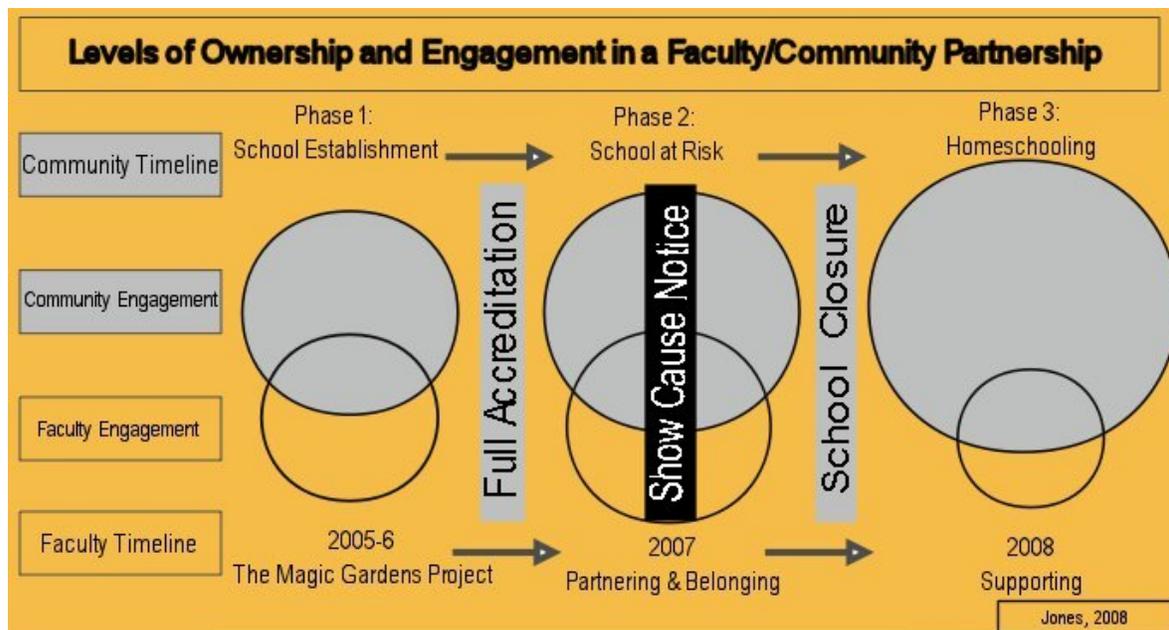


Figure 4: Phases of the Study and participants’ power and ownership

In figure 4 the interpolations driving internal change over three years are represented by vertical bars. The critical turning point, in terms of parental anger and ownership is,

surprisingly, not the school closure, but an earlier intervention shown in black. At this juncture, four months after having been fully accredited by the Office of Non-State Schooling the school was given a show cause notice requiring a response to 90 points on which it was under threat of closure. This metaphorical snake in the garden resulted in a unification of purpose for the community increasing all participants' awareness of the special nature of this school and its importance for children and families.

Phase 1: School Establishment/The Magic Gardens Project

Looking back on this study I am amazed at my early naivety and my perception of community engagement as a project separate from my personal and professional life. In retrospect, I wonder if I would have had the courage to take the initial step towards the partnership had I known the degree to which community engagement would move beyond being a 'project' to becoming a way of life. I am glad that my naivety and the trust of the community allowed me to take the first step into what has become a long-term partnership and life-changing experience, informing my work as an educator.

In late 2005 I met with 6 parents and their 10 children, and John and Meg as they prepared to incorporate and establish their school. The school was to be housed in a scout building which had none of the trappings of a traditional school environment at that time. In a bushland setting, without paths, notices, numbers, displays or other signifiers, the premises initially challenged my expectations of what constituted a school:

Can this be the school?! I am surprised that it seems so very basic and rather isolated. (Fieldnotes 13.12.05, para.1).

Nevertheless, the parents and children seemed relaxed and calmly determined to launch their school. John invited

...parents to come to the school and to spend as much time there as they wish at any time... to bring their own skills to the school to share with the students as a community. (Fieldnotes 13.12.05, para.2).

Despite John's goal for parents to take ownership, it was evident to me that the driving force behind the establishment of the school was John and Meg, although parents were actively engaged in professional conversations:

The adults often engaged in professional discussion and the teachers updated and promoted professional literature which many parents borrowed, read and subsequently discussed... (John's Fieldnotes May 2008, para.15)

On my first visit to the school I proposed a project to the community: The Magic Gardens Project. Funding from the university's Regional Engagement Incentives Fund (REIF) would allow the purchase of plants and other resources negotiated between the community and me as project leader. The purchase of a digital video camera provided an exciting incentive for co-operative engagement as it would allow recording of the school's development. My intention at this point in the study was that my doctorate would focus on this project, and a proposal indicated that with support from faculty staff and students of the university

...children and community of a school would create a garden for the arts, (REIF proposal January 2006)

Outcomes would include filmed records of the process, a community-created garden displaying student art works, musical sculptures, and a public launch with exhibition of media showing the process of environmental planning and development. The most important criterion for evaluation of the REIF project's success was sustainability: the

community must take ownership of the project. The project has succeeded, but in ways that were never anticipated.

The school community enthusiastically accepted the REIF proposal, but my reflection on the early stages of engagement with the school community made it clear that my beliefs underpinning the proposal had been naive.

Suddenly the whole project - to make a garden for the arts – seemed ridiculous and impossible. I realize that I had come to the school with adult agendas – that children don't normally build or create gardens much less gardens for the arts. That I was not starting from an honest position. (Blog 11.00.06)

During this and the next phase of the study through professional conversations with the community and my students, I came to understand that my learning in this non-traditional context and its impact upon my pedagogical practice was a more important aspect of this study and my intended doctorate than the project as described in the REIF proposal.

Nonetheless the lesser project to create a garden continued and the school garden was created and launched during a severe drought and a bitter winter, and despite the ravages of wildlife.

During the establishment of the garden I found myself becoming part of the community and looking forward to the long and intense conversations shared with facilitators and parents. These became part of my ongoing reflexive practice mirroring the children's creative learning through play. We did not plan the garden, as I had originally intended: instead, as suggested by John and Meg, we watched where the children ran, and allowed these natural pathways to define the shape of the garden. This co-construction of new understandings began to inform my work as an educator of pre-service teachers,

challenging my beliefs as a self-professed constructivist and student-centred practitioner. In the same way as paths the garden formed as a result of children's repeated journeying across the landscape, my understandings evolved, through continuing engagement, written reflections and professional conversations with John, Meg and parents. A valuable source of reflexive professional development for us all (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) our co-constructed narratives of learning and research reflected processes used by other communities generating knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Kleinman & Copp, 1993; Millar & Kilpatrick, 2005). These processes demanding emotional and psychological labour, as well as a readiness to challenge our preconceived ideas, as shown in the work of Jarzabowski (2001).

Today I found the intensity of the conversations with John exhausting, and found myself longing to step back from those conversations to return to working with the children, but this time I stopped myself from doing so, trying to relax into the political and educational debate...as a respected 'other' my validation of the shared understandings that he and Meg had evolved over some years has real meaning. These conversations are both political and personal and I am acutely aware that how I respond is vitally important to John and Meg. During this visit it became clear that there was more to the Magic Gardens Project than the creation of a garden, and the filming and analysis of film. I have come to think that it is about my journey as an educator...but I'm now coming to understand that this is not simply my journey: it is others' journey and story too. (Researcher's Blog 11.04.06)

Phase 2: The School at Risk/Partnering and Belonging

During the mid-phase of this study, in early 2007 the school had 16 enrolments and a growing base of families with younger children waiting to attend. The proposed partnership between the university and the community changed in nature and in the degree of commitment to engagement as found by Boyer and Roth (2006). University academics who had expressed an interest in the study failed to become involved, whereas students from the theatre department became regular participants over several terms

running drama workshops. Students from the primary degree program were frequent visitors, as I shared stories with them of my work with the community. The community engagement process began to inform my pedagogical landscape, inspiring my teaching.

At this stage of the study, project funding had long been exhausted, and I began subsidizing my own travel and using time allocated to research for the visits. Pre-service teachers would present performances, walkabout theatre and other arts activities as part of their assessment tasks, and the experience of being in a play-based learning environment challenged their beliefs about teaching and learning. My doctoral thesis shifted in focus: it was no longer about a 'project' but about an ongoing and life-changing partnership.

The Magic Gardens Project is me: it is the people I am learning and working with: and it is embodied not only in physical artefact but in the written and spoken word and the realities that those words create. (Researcher's Blog 30.05.06)

When the school received an unexpected visit from the Office of Non-State Schooling (ONSS) and received a show cause notice, support from university faculty and students seemed to evaporate. When universities define their community engagement in terms of leadership and strategic partnerships, (University of Southern Queensland, 2008) or for 'social, cultural and economic development' (Planning Office at the University of Essex, 2007, para 1) the emphasis upon measurable and sustainable outcomes means that a community under threat is less likely to receive support directly or indirectly from its university partner. At such a juncture the academic as researcher (Yapa, 2006) in a non viable community project may consequently identify more with the community than with

his or her university context. Here, I found myself in a troubled and troubling third space between engagement in a community and loyalty to the university.

At this stage of the partnership my sense of identification with the school community became very strong and it remains so. By allying myself to what was clearly a lost cause I became aware that there was a risk that my continuing engagement might impact negatively upon my career. When the school closed and I was interviewed by the local media, no mention of the 2 page article appeared in the university's media watch page, and the silence of peers left me in no doubt that many colleagues' sympathies were not aligned with my own. During this phase of the study, the university was also narrowing its focus on community engagement in order to pursue strategic partnerships with tangible long term benefits.

Phase 3: Home schooling and Supporting

By February 2008 the school had 25 children and 13 families, with more families expressing wish to attend. Moneys had been invested in school buses, legal fees, insurance, rental and refurbishments including soft flooring and new paint, art materials, books and IT hardware and software. New parents had been warned that the community school was awaiting a decision regarding the corporate body's appeal to the Minister for Education for a review of the ONSS recommendation that the school should close on grounds of financial viability and child-safety. The Minister rejected the appeal advising the school by letter on 21st February that a decision had been made on 14th February that the school must close. There was no period allowed for winding down: funds allocated to

the school for the new term must be repaid in full and parents must find another school for their children within days. On Friday 7th March 2008, a shocked and fearful group of parents attend an emergency meeting at the school at the end of the working day:

A large group of parents sit outside the school, trying to find a way ahead. They have just been told the school is closing and that there is no period of grace. They are angry and fearful. Their children are happy and thriving.

‘Perhaps we could continue as a home schoolers’ resource centre?’

Some parents would rather not have to register as home schoolers. They fear that there is a risk of police action as happened after another rural community school tried to continue in operation after its licence was revoked. (Fieldnotes, 7th March 2008)

DEST recently advised that the school has been considered non-accredited since December 31st 2007 and that the entirety of the advance for the 2008 school year must now be returned or the school will be required to repay funds from the year 2007 also. This leaves John and Meg at risk of losing their home, an experience similar to that of the community of Booroobin Sudbury School (Sheppard, 2003, 2004; 2007). John and Meg cannot meet the costs of legal representation and at the point of submission of this paper, their request for consideration of costs incurred in resourcing, planning and providing education for the children of 13 families for 2008 remains undecided.

Following the closure of the Magic Gardens School eight families chose to register for home schooling, and John and Meg agreed to continue operating as a resource centre for those families, under a newly incorporated body. Despite the context of financial debt there remains a shared but fragile sense of optimism and purpose. Parents have now taken ownership of their children’s education, and the newly formed community group allows the families and their children to maintain professional and personal friendships for learning. As a researcher I continue to work with the community as they home school

their children, although meetings are less frequent. The parents now meet at the previous school premises to use the many resources that remain there, or to engage in discussions about teaching and learning in coffee shops, or they travel with their children on community learning days to parks or wildlife areas. My input and that of John and Meg has reduced as parents have taken ownership of teaching and learning. However, my professional conversations with John and Meg continue, and we plan to co-author and publish during 2008.

Part 4: Scholarship of Engagement: A Neo-narrative

John reflects upon the importance of the school community for parents' confidence as educators of their children:

The adults often engaged in professional discussion and the teachers updated and promoted professional literature which many parents borrowed, read and subsequently discussed with the teachers and other parents and visitors (John's fieldnotes, 23.05.2008 para 15).

Now, ongoing reflexive conversations position parents, facilitators and me as co-researchers. There is a new purpose and a genuine equality of ownership reflected in our shared input into and agreement to co-author and present at conferences in a future where legal and financial matters connected with the school closure have been resolved.

In concluding, as participant researcher in this study, I acknowledge the importance and complexity of community engagement, its demands and its riches, recognizing that it has a purpose beyond strategic partnerships as envisioned in the rhetoric of many university websites. This partnership has allowed a community of parents, children, a teacher-researcher and student teachers to reflect upon the transparency of systems, and on the

impact of government and administrative controls on community education, creating a third space for their personal and professional growth. Now, the partners in this study are no longer separate entities: there is a unification of our purposes and understandings, and a more equal ownership of power and agency for us all as educators. Hence, this concluding paragraph refers to we/us rather than separate community and university.

Although The Magic Gardens School has closed, as a community we continue to challenge our shared and separate understandings of the epistemologies and ontologies we inhabit and create as lifelong learners and teachers. The process of community engagement can be volatile and troubling, generating new understandings for all partners. John and Meg offer a final comment on the benefits of community partnership for student learning in a time of transition for us all. John celebrates that parents have taken ownership and pride in their ability to educate their children solely and as a community, and that play has become a central feature of that experience:

Many challenges are yet to be resolved, but staff and parents see this new development as possibly the next inevitable and essential step in the growth of an idea which has shown that child initiated play and parent intellectual development are the foundations of maximizing the potential for growing children. (John's Fieldnotes, May 2008 para 17)

In conclusion, my epistemology as an educator has changed. I am less confident in my practice and more doubtful about the politics and philosophies that underpin current educational practice. The 'student centred' approaches which I confidently believed were central to my practice have now been replaced by a critical and ongoing review on the

reality of my practice, on the importance of small and non-traditional schools and parental engagement in education. With my students and peers in university and community contexts nationally and internationally, I am exploring what might be achieved through alternative approaches and environments for teaching and learning, and through the co-generation of knowledge by community and university partners.

- Allen, R. L. (1999). The socio-spatial making and marking of 'us': Toward a critical postmodern spatial theory of difference and community. *Social Identities*, 5(3), 249-278.
- Alvermann, D. E. (2000). Narrative approaches. In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 3). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Amberley School Community Action Group. (2007). You can still help! [Electronic Version]. *Amberley School Closure Website Online*. Retrieved 27 June 2008 from <http://www.amberleyschoolclosure.com/you-can-help-2/>.
- Appleton, M. (1992). *School as community: The ecology of childhood--a view from summerhill school* (pp. 7): Down-to-Earth Books, 72 Philip Street, Albany, NY 12202.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2006a). *Australian social trends: Government and non-government schooling*. Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/9FA90AEC587590EDCA2571B00014B9B3?opendocument>.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2006b). *Australian social trends*. Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/9fa90aec587590edca2571b00014b9b3!OpenDocument>.
- Baillie, L. (2008). Threatened school closure hits community [Electronic Version]. *ABC News*, April 24 from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/04/24/2226234.htm>.
- Barr, R. D., & Parrett, W. H. (1999). Trends and issues: School choice [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 19.08.07 from http://eric.uoregon.edu/trends_issues/choice/index.html.
- Bechtel, R. B. (1997). *Environment & behavior: An introduction* Retrieved 25 May 2008, from <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=i7wyCs4KObQC>.
- Boyer, L., & Roth, W.-M. (2006). Learning and teaching as emergent features of informal settings: An ethnographic study in an environmental action group. *Science Education*, 90(6), 1028-1049.
- Caldwell, B. J. (2005). Research on school size. *Educational Transformations, Briefing Paper 1*.

- Cannella, G. S. (1999). The scientific discourse of education: Predetermining the lives of others – Foucault, education, and children. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1(1), 1 - 9.
- Carbonell, R. (2004). Rural schools closing a sign of the times On AM [Radio Interview Transcript]: Australian Broadcasting Corporation Online.
- Clandinin, J. D., & Connelly, M. F. (1995). *Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes* (Vol. 15). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clandinin, J. D., & Connelly, M. F. (2000). *Narrative inquiry : Experience and story in qualitative research* (1 ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Cloke, P., & Jones, O. (2005). Unclaimed territory: Childhood and disordered space(s). *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6(3), 311-333.
- Connelly, M. F., & Clandinin, J. D. (1999). *Shaping a professional identity : Stories of educational practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Conoley, J. C., & Goldstein, A. P. (2004). *School violence intervention: A practical handbook* from http://books.google.com.au/books?id=ue_No2Zsr58C.
- Cotton, K. (1996). School size, school climate, and student performance [Electronic Version]. *School Improvement Research Series: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory*. Retrieved May from <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html>
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997a). Flow and creativity. *NAMTA Journal*, 22(2), 38.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997b). Finding flow. *Psychology Today*, 30(4), 5.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Education for the 21st century: Mapping the field of forces that shape children's lives *Education Week*, 19(32), 3.
- Curry, J. (2003). *Irish social services*. Retrieved 25 May 2008, from <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=TI0Zwv5M4XUC>.
- Gilman, R., & Gilman, D. (1984). Waldorf education: Looking into the educational system developed by Rudolf Steiner. An interview with Caroline Osthimer. *In Context, A Quarterly of Sustainable Human Culture*, 6(Summer).
- Greenfield, S., Porritt, J., Leach, P., Bowlby, R., Brighouse, T., Brookes, M., et al. (2006 13/09/2006). Modern life leads to more depression among children [letter to the editor]. *The Daily Telegraph*.
- Jarzabowski, L. (2001). Emotional labour in educational research. *Queensland Journal of Educational Research*, 17(2), 123 - 137.
- Jenkinson. (2001). *The genius of play : Celebrating the spirit of childhood* Stroud, Gloucestershire.: Stroud : Hawthorn.
- Kleinman, S., & Copp, M. A. (1993). *Emotions and fieldwork*. Newbury Park, California: Sage.
- Klonsky, M. (2002). How smaller schools prevent school violence: Research shows that small schools are safer schools—and several real-world examples help explain why [Electronic Version], 59, 65-69. Retrieved 25 May 2008 from http://www.ascd.org/ed_topics/el200202_klonsky.html.
- Leue, M. M. E. (1992). Challenging the giant: The best of skole, the journal of alternative education (Publication., from Down-to-Earth Books, 72 Philip Street, Albany, NY 12202 (\$12.95).

- Marshall, W. (2006). World socialist website [Electronic Version]. *Australian state government launches new wave of school closures*. Retrieved 29 June 2008.
- Meegan, R., & Mitchell, A. (2001). 'it's not community round here, it's neighbourhood': Neighbourhood change and cohesion in urban regeneration policies. *Urban Studies*, 38(12), 2167-2194.
- Meier, D. (2000). What do kids need? *Eye on Education* Retrieved 5 May, 2006, from <http://www.eyeducation.tv/reform/meier.html>
- Mercogliano, C. (1998). Rid-a-him or: Why are so many boys given drugs in school? Chapters 2 and 3. *SKOLE: The Journal of Alternative Education*, v15 n3 p70-95 Sum 1998.
- Millar, P., & Kilpatrick, S. (2005). How community development programmes can foster re-engagement with learning in disadvantaged communities: Leadership as process. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 37(1), 18-30.
- Mitchell, S. (2000). Jack and the giant school [Electronic Version]. *The New Rules: Exploring Community, Scale and Trade*, 2. Retrieved 25 May 2008 from <http://www.newrules.org/journal/nrsum00schools.htm>.
- New, R. S. (2003). Reggio emilia: New ways to think about schooling. *Educational Leadership*, 60(7), 4.
- Payne, K. J., River-Bento, B., & Skillings, A. (2002). Initial report of the waldorf adhd research project. *Research Bulletin*, 7(1).
- Planning Office at the University of Essex. (2007, 2nd March). University of essex strategic plan 2006/07 - 2010/11. Retrieved 23 May, 2008, from <http://www.essex.ac.uk/planning/strategic/pages/business.shtm#obj2>
- Princiotta, D., & Bielick, S. (2006). *Homeschooling in the united states: 1999*. Retrieved. from <http://nces.ed.gov>.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing, a method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Denzin, Norman K.
- Sheppard, D. (2003). [discuss-sudbury-model] another assessment of booroobin [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 27 June, 2008 from <http://www.sudburyvalleyschool.com/archives/dsm8/0485.html>.
- Sheppard, D. (2004). Online petition: Maintain accreditation of the booroobin sudbury school. *ThePetitionSite.com* Retrieved 28 June, 2008, from <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/408446208>
- Sheppard, D. (2007). The eight hour day? In A. B. A. Leigh (Ed.), *Andrew Leigh: New ideas on economics, politics and current events, from an Antipodean perspective (Weblog)*.
- Skelton, G. (2006). Six new super schools. On *Adelaide Now...* [News article]. Adelaide: The Advertiser.
- Stager, G. (2002). The best kept secret this side of italy. *District Administration - The Magazine for K12 Education Leaders* Retrieved April 9th 2006, from <http://www.districtadministration.com/page.cfm?id=172>
- Stewart, R. (1997). Constructing neonarratives: A pluralistic approach to research *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 16(3).

- University of Southern Queensland. (2008, 20 February). Community: Our vision. Retrieved 23 May 2008, from <http://www.usq.edu.au/community/industrygovt/vision.htm>
- Weston, P. (2008). Parents fight school closures [Electronic Version]. *Couriermail.com.au* from <http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,23527459-3102,00.html>.
- Williams, D. T. (1990). *The dimensions of education: Recent research on school size.* : Clemson University: Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs.
- Witham, M. (1993). The economic rationale for closing small country schools Retrieved 25 May, 2008, from <http://www.nexus.edu.au/teachstud/dexed/docs/closure.html>
- Woestehoff, J. (2005). Parents fight school closings [Electronic Version]. *Rethinking Schools Online*, 19 from http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/19_04/pare194.shtml.
- Woods, P., Ashley, M., & Woods, G. (2005). *Steiner schools in england*. Retrieved 7 April 2007. from <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR645.pdf>.
- Yapa, L. (2006). Public scholarship in the postmodern university. *A Laboratory for Public Scholarship and Democracy: New Directions for Teaching and Learning*(105), 112.