# FACING THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGING LITERACIES: A STUDY OF QUEENSLAND PRIMARY TEACHERS AND THEIR ENGAGEMENTS WITH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significance of collaborative partnerships as a determining factor in teachers' engagements with professional learning in the context of educational reform. The aspect of learning under review concerns the expectation that primary teachers in Queensland take on board new, media-related literacies.

## INTRODUCTION

The challenges posed by lifelong learning can seem overwhelming to practising teachers, particularly when they feel there is little support from those around them. In this context, "lifelong learning" refers to the expectation that teachers commit to ongoing professional learning. This responsibility may be considered non-negotiable for those involved in the knowledge industry, but there is no guarantee that teachers will be independently motivated to pursue this learning pathway. This paper explores the significance of collaborative partnerships for primary-school teachers in Queensland in determining their willingness to learn about, and engage with, new conceptions of literacy. Although there are many kinds of proposed "new" literacies, in this context I concentrate on those related to the teaching of "media" as a requirement of the new Queensland arts syllabus (Years 1-10) (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2001). The reactions of primary-school teachers involved in this process are used to illustrate the range of values and beliefs that such practitioners have regarding their role in curriculum reform and related forms of professional learning.

The study is based on research conducted in 2002 when I interviewed 26 primary-school teachers about their reactions to the new arts syllabus (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2001). The specific tool of analysis employed to interrogate the data is discourse analysis. Jennifer Nias' (1987, 1989, 1992) work about teacher identity is used to highlight the range of discourses that teachers use when talking about their relationships with others in the context of reform processes.

In this paper I firstly present the findings from literature concerning the drive for changing versions of literacy and the implications this has for the teacher's role. The conceptual framework and the methodological principles that define this research are then discussed. This leads to an analysis of the findings of the research in terms of teachers' collaborative partnerships and their involvement in professional learning. Finally, I present some of the implications of these findings for policymakers and school administrators, who are also partners in this learning journey.

## THE BACKGROUND: LEARNING ABOUT NEW LITERACIES

Concerns about the changing educational needs of students and what is considered valuable knowledge inevitably impact upon the role of the teacher (Helsby, 1999). Taking on board new understandings of literacies implies that teachers will need to participate in related forms of professional learning. "Professional learning" in this context refers to formal sessions of professional development organized by administrators, as well as to the informal sharing of ideas amongst teachers, and to teachers' personal initiatives – such as their commitment to keep up with their professional reading. It is widely assumed that teachers are obligated to be lifelong learners, since teaching is a knowledge-based occupation that seeks to address the demands of a learning society. According to Hargreaves (2003, p. 16), "professional learning in teaching is an individual obligation as well as an institutional right". An ongoing commitment to professional learning is all the more imperative for teachers today because of the fluid and complex nature of postmodern environments (Fullan,1993; Day, (1997).

One aspect of this ongoing change concerns the expectation that teachers address new technologies and their associated literacies.

Growing attention has been given to the new literacies agenda which has arisen in response to technological, institutional, media, economic, and global trends (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). Such transformations recognise that literacies are always evolving; as technologies change, so too do the ways we practise literacy and perceive its social role (Lankshear and Snyder, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, new literacies are defined in terms of the skills and understandings used in the negotiation of multimedia environments.

This changing focus is evident in the new Queensland arts syllabus (Years 1-10) (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2001), which nominates "media" as one of its five arts strands (the others being "dance", "drama", "music" and "visual arts"). In keeping with changing paradigms, literacy is described as "reading and writing, speaking and listening, viewing and shaping, often in combination in multimodal texts, within a range of contexts" (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2001, p. 8). The study of media in this document is concerned with both the technical aspects of multimedia (for example, teaching students to "utilise techniques associated with the audio/visual presentation and particular media forms", p. 33) as well as the critical aspects of the mass media (for example, developing the ability to "critically appraise information", p. 8).

The literature suggests that the ways in which teachers take such changing mindsets on board will be greatly influenced by the environment in which they work and their relationships with the other people in those environments. According to Hargreaves (1997b), a teacher who works in a climate of trust – in which teachers support one another, and in which risk-taking and initiative are encouraged, is more likely to embrace change and to engage in professional learning than a teacher whose working environment is characterised by individualism and segregation. The opportunity for ongoing communication is considered essential if teachers are going to be committed to change (Finnan and Levin, 2000). Professional strategies such as working in teams (Yeomans, 1992) and peer mentoring (Day, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997b) are examples of the collaborative partnerships needed to facilitate reform and ongoing professional learning.

## THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to explore the function of professional partnerships, I draw on the work of Nias (1987, 1989, 1992) who highlights the significance of the human dimension in reform processes. From this perspective, understandings of teachers' identities and the relationships they form in the school environment are fundamental to any analysis of educational reform and teachers' engagements with professional learning.

According to Nias (1987, 1992), a cooperative environment in which professional learning is encouraged is a prerequisite for change and growth:

> For teachers in particular, a necessary condition for professional change is likely to be the creation of an atmosphere in which they feel free to try out new ways of behaving and to discuss with their peers what they think and do. (1987, p. 11)

Nias (1987, 1989) suggests that collegial relationships have a direct impact upon the individual teacher's attitude towards reform. Therefore, curriculum reform is more likely to take place in schools where teachers work together to make it happen. This premise has been taken up by a number of other prominent theorists who have explored the notion of "collaborative cultures", including Hargreaves (1997) and Fullan (1993).

The groups of people that teachers rely on for moral support, known as *reference groups*, are used for monitoring personal goals and values (Nias, 1987, p. 8; Nias, 1989, p. 45). It follows then that a reference group can be a "powerful obstacle to change or a strong innovative force" (Nias, 1987, p. 10). Such relationships may be considered of special significance in times of ongoing reform because of the potentially negative effects such uncertainty may evince (Nias, 1989). According to Nias (1987), the interactions of these groups are important, not just from a pedagogical viewpoint, but also because of the social and emotional support that is offered.

Nias also identifies a tendency for teachers to adopt a passive role in reform processes and professional learning because of their dependency on others. The concept of *authority dependence* (Nias, 1987, p. 27) is used to describe the reluctance of teachers to take initiative in reform movements. Nias (1987, p. 27) traces this sidestepping of responsibility back to the academic traditions within educational institutions in which teachers "have always been passive receptors rather than creators of professional knowledge". The more that professional learning is perceived as being the responsibility of others, the more that

teachers rely on guidance from "experts" in their teaching practice (Nias, 1987).

Perhaps it is partly for this reason that the leadership offered within school environments is considered a crucial element in reform (Nais, 1987). According to Nias (1987, p. 39), "a sympathetic, supportive leader" will characteristically provide teachers with the opportunity to engage in open discussion and help teachers to feel that they have a valuable contribution to make. Therefore, positive leadership is likely to encourage positive attitudes in terms of sharing of ideas, a willingness to take risks and a personal commitment to professional learning.

## THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The research upon which this study is based was undertaken in 2002 for the purposes of my doctoral thesis. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 primary-school teachers in Central Queensland from February to June of that year. These teachers came from 11 different government schools with a range of student populations. The teachers in this study were chosen because of the diversity they represent. Most of the teachers in the study were considerably experienced: nine had more than 20 years of experience; 11 had between 10 and 20 years of experience; and six had been teaching for fewer than 10 years. These teachers represented a range of roles in the primary school context: 19 were practising primary-school teachers (including pre-school); two were principals; one was a supply teacher; one was a teacher/librarian; and three had advisory roles. Eight of these teachers considered that they had already had a background in multimedia.

Drawing on "post-structuralist sensibilities" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 9), I will analyse the data in terms of the multiple discourses that emerge. The term "discourse" may be used in a variety of ways but in this context I am interested in it as a broad pattern of communication that reflects particular ideologies: "a way of speaking that is consistent with the beliefs/values/mindsets of a particular context and that, in the process, helps to produce the context" (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, and Lankshear, 2002, p. 54). Therefore, the words that teachers use – and the silences that also become evident – are analysed according to the underlying ideologies that emerge. The tendency for some discourses to be used more widely than others offers insights into how this

group of primary-school teachers perceive their role in a particular curriculum reform and their engagements with professional learning. The key discourses to be discussed in this paper are those of disconnectedness (disengagement from reform processes), passivity (reluctance to take change on board), and collaboration (sense of cooperation and team-work).

## PRIMARY TEACHERS AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The findings from this study confirm the influence of particular people – or reference groups (Nias, 1987, 1989) – as a key ingredient in teachers' commitment to professional learning. Teachers referred to the value of partnerships with particular individuals on staff in terms of sharing ideas, skills, and resources. In some cases, a mentoring relationship was described. Eileen[1], for example, referred to the encouragement that she received from a particular colleague who introduced her to multimedia activities:

> I had a good mentor when I was learning my computer skills because I started with nothing and my mentor was the teacher/librarian. And she said, "Look, this is easy!" Because I looked at her and went, "No, this is far too hard for me!" And she said, "No, break it down into small steps and go from there." And when I did that, it was like, this is easy! Anyone can do this! (Eileen)

Eileen's reference to her colleague as being *"a good mentor"* is indicative of a discourse of collaboration. The personal, as well as the professional, support described by Nias (1987) is evident in this response. In assuring Eileen that "this is easy*!"* the mentor has clearly assisted Eileen in overcoming her beliefs about her own inadequacies.

In some cases, teachers referred to the influence of key partners in terms of their impact on the staff as a whole. School leaders, such as principals and deputy principals, were sometimes named because of the way they encouraged professional development and reform processes generally. Lena, for example, described the positive influence of the leadership within a particular school in which she had worked previously:

> And I think that also, where you are, and your leaders [are important]. Like last year I was at

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[1] Pseudonyms have been used to maintain the anonymity of all participants involved.

Blackmore School and they've got two great leaders: a great principal and a wonderful deputy. And so we had a lot of in-service. Even though I was an itinerant, just based there for a couple of days a week, I was involved, and they had some really good in-service. . . . Each week we'd be kept up to date with what . . . was happening and [it was] just very, very positive. Other schools don't have that. (Lena)

A discourse of collaboration is evident in her descriptions of this school's culture, with phrases such as "two great leaders", "involved", "really good in-service", and "very, very positive" being used. This teacher, like others in the study, spoke of how beneficial she found it to share ideas with her colleagues; other teachers mentioned how much they appreciated being able to attend professional development activities during school time. According to Nias (1987), a supportive leader plays a crucial role in encouraging teachers to commit to the professional learning implied by reform processes.

The ways in which teachers described their involvement in professional learning, and reform processes in general, seemed to be a school-by-school phenomenon. There was often a similarity in the responses of teachers who worked in the same school in terms of describing their engagements with new technologies and/or professional learning. Those schools perceived by teachers as more proactive in organized forms of professional development also seemed more supportive of curriculum reform.

The following two quotations from teachers illustrate contrasting school values in terms of engagement with new technologies. Rosalind works in a school in which very little had been done:

I'd say in the majority of the school 'Word' and 'Publishing' would be about it when it comes to using computers. In fact, one of our staff heard – his daughter was in Grade 7 here last year and she's gone to high school. And very early in the year they had to do a PowerPoint presentation in Year 8 for a particular subject for something. And the only students in her class at the high school who had never done PowerPoint was her and her mates from here. (Rosalind)

A discourse of disconnectedness is apparent here since the teachers at this school appear to have disengaged from this aspect of reform. The silences in this interview are also significant. Despite the teacher's sense of horror that the students at their school were so poorly equipped in terms of their technical proficiencies,

nowhere in her interview did she suggest that she would be trying to address this deficit by becoming involved in learning about multimedia herself. From this perspective, a discourse of passivity is also evident.

In contrast, Colette, who worked in a school that actively promoted digital technologies, commented on how this whole-school commitment to professional learning had given her staff tremendous advantages in coming to terms with multimedia:

[It is a] huge bonus! I can see how much it's helped everyone from the staff point of view – when I listen to them talking and hear their frustrations. I don't think they realise how far ahead they are until they actually go out and have a look at other schools. They don't know how lucky they are — how 'out there' they are. And they don't see that. (Collete)

A discourse of collaboration is suggested in this response at a number of levels. When Colette described how she would "listen to [teachers] talking and hear their frustrations" it is evident that the teaching staff are prepared to share their struggles with each other as they embark on this learning pathway together. Furthermore, Colette's pride in the achievements of her teaching colleagues implies a sense of collegiality: "I don't think they realise how far ahead they are". This response illustrates the collaboration identified by Nias, Southworth, and Campbell (1992, p. 235) in which staff members "share, challenge and extend one another's aims and values" and are given the opportunity "to play an individual role in a team".

This kind of support is particularly important at times when teachers are feeling vulnerable such as when they are trying to put in place the ideas and skills learnt at professional-development sessions. Paul described the experiences of the teachers at his school when they participated in workshops introducing computer animation:

Teachers went away and trained in that . . . but they were trained on Apples. It's easier on an Apple than it is on an IBM. They felt what they learnt wasn't really transferable back to their classroom. Just because of the different systems. We tried to set up one of our computers with *DVD Studio* so they could do it, but we need a much more advanced computer to run it properly. (Paul)

In this case, the frustrations of using a different operating system back at their school was enough for these teachers to lose interest in what they had learnt. In the final analysis, they

believed that the knowledge acquired "wasn't really transferable back to their classroom". The discourse of disconnectedness evident in this response illustrates the build-up of negativity that can characterise ongoing reform (Nias, 1989).

Daniel, who has conducted professional-development sessions in new technologies, was similarly critical of the pedagogical value of short bursts of professional development:

> And we ask for feedback and the most common feedback is, "How can we get this done in our school?" So what we need to do is change from being just that cattle dipping mentality of PD [professional development] which is what most PD is . . . . Have people come in, develop that mind change, and then go out and support it in their classroom in planning. (Daniel)

Reference to "that cattle dipping mentality", the need to "support [professional learning] in their classroom" and the pertinent question, "How can we get this done in our school?" all capture a discourse of disconnectedness. Teachers can feel abandoned if the ideas learnt at professional-development sessions are not consolidated. Daniel's response shows that this sense of frustration is felt by the organizers of such workshops as well as the participants.

## IMPLICATIONS

Bearing in mind the challenging nature of professional learning and reform processes generally, it stands to reason that any kind of change is going to be difficult to effect unless teachers are supported through the process in tangible ways. Therefore, educational leaders have an important role as partners in the learning journey since they can determine the level and type of support that is given to teachers. This leadership is especially pertinent in view of the preference of some teachers to adopt a passive role in professional learning. School administrators, such as principals and deputy principals, can encourage collaborative partnerships by allowing teachers to have time off for professional development, and scheduling times during the week when teachers can engage in professional dialogue with their colleagues. They can support teacher exchanges and/or mentoring arrangements so that teachers with particular expertise can assist their colleagues in the classroom on an inter-school as well as an intra-school basis.

These findings have particular implications for the organized forms of professional development undertaken by teachers. As

Hargreaves (1997a) reinforces, there needs to be a long-term commitment to change if teachers are to work through their feelings of vulnerability when faced with reform. In the context of taking up new, media-related literacies, any programs of professional development need to address the lack of confidence that many teachers feel in this regard. Understanding the implications of multimedia skills and literacies is not the sort of professional development that can be achieved in a two-day workshop. According to Kenway and Nixon (1999, p. 474), "the full implications of the new information and communications technologies for teaching and learning in schools are enormously difficult to come to grips with".

Therefore, whatever professional development is provided for teachers needs to be ongoing and sustained. The short bursts of intensive professional development – i.e., the "cattle-dipping" approach – is a pedagogical model that has been shown to be ineffective. The momentum achieved at workshops quickly diminishes if teachers encounter too many obstacles trying to put these new ideas into place. Follow-up support for teachers in the classroom may be one way forward, particularly in the context of using new technologies. Of course, all such initiatives will be dependent upon the allocation of appropriate resources at a policy-making level. As Day (1997) points out, the success of professional development relies in part upon whether it is supported by an appropriate commitment of time and resources.

## CONCLUSION

Although teaching today is inextricably linked to being a lifelong learner, not all teachers willingly assume this role. Therefore, the professional learning implicit in the new arts syllabus (Years 1-10) (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2001) in terms of addressing new, media-focused literacies represents a challenge to primary-school teachers in a number of ways. The need to develop collaborative partnerships has been shown to be a significant factor in whether or not teachers are prepared to commit to this professional learning. These relationships are important, not only from a pedagogical viewpoint, but also for the personal and emotional support that is offered. In some cases, mentoring partnerships were described; at other times teachers spoke of individual leaders within the school as being instrumental in effecting a positive school climate in relation to

curriculum reform. Teachers were much more likely to have a positive response to professional learning and reform processes when their descriptions of their school environments were characterised by a discourse of collaboration.

Consolidation of professional learning has emerged as a crucial pedagogical factor in reform efforts. Professional development for teachers needs to be of an ongoing nature if the teaching of new literacies is to become any kind of classroom reality. School administrators, have an important role to play in ensuring that teachers are given the support they need but this can only be achieved if government policies reinforce these efforts with appropriate levels of funding. In this way, administrators and policy-makers, as partners in lifelong learning, can support professional development for teachers as a long-term commitment rather than as a cattle-dipping exercise.

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