

SELF, OTHERS AND PLACE A STORY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP AND WHOLE SCHOOL REFORM

**Greenbank State School
1997 - 2005**

Ron Tooth

**217 Grandview Road, Pullenvale 4069 Ph: (07) 3374 0082
University of Queensland email: s887458@student.uq.edu.au**

Abstract

A key aspect of any effort to reform or change schools is school leadership. The practice of school leaders, and in particular how school leaders learn to initiate and facilitate change, is worthy of detailed study. This short summary paper is drawn from a larger ethnographic study that explores how a school principal, Chris Quinn, used a mentored 'environmental narrative' and 'environmental analysis' approach to move a whole school community through a profound process of cultural change over a nine-year period. Building on a foundation of complexity and activity theory, this paper develops a situated view of leadership that lives between two worlds, arguing that successful leaders know how to exist in this dual learning zone. It is argued that these leaders seek to build on and influence values and culture as they open new and creative pathways for change through the mediated use of cultural tools and by staying open and emotionally attuned to the spontaneous self-organizing forces of chaos and complexity within their organization. Together these two theories help explain how this leader worked with her staff to change and transform the school. (*The original more detailed version of this study has been submitted for publication.*)

Introduction

The story of whole school reform outlined in this article is based on a narrative inquiry into the way Chris Quinn, a primary school principal, moved a whole school community through a process of profound organizational change and struggled to align an integrated vision of environmental education with the key concept of 'Growing a Sense of Place'. This was a major learning journey for Chris and for the school that challenged established views about curriculum and learning and opened up new pathways into constructivist thinking about the nature of teaching and leadership.

The process unfolded in its own facilitated, yet random and often chaotic way, as part of a loosely organized and complex journey that used the Storythread approach as a pedagogical tool. Storythread is a specific pedagogical form of the 'environmental narrative' genre that emerged in the early 1980's at Pullenvale Environmental Education Centre (Tooth, Wager, & Proellocks, 1988) and within a short time generated interest nationally and internationally

(Robottom & Andrew, 1996), as part of an emerging interest in the power of narrative to revitalize pedagogy and classroom practice (Egan, 1988).

Storythread (Tooth & Gulikers, 2004) uses a 're-centred' arts inquiry and 'environmental narrative' process to link students with a 'decentered' analytical and scientific approach that can achieve deep learning in real contexts and settings. 'Recentring' (Turner, 1973) describes the way human beings have always used figurative and imaginative processes to re-conceptualise and think deeply about their activity through art, religion, story, poetry, myth and ritual. 'Environmental narrative' has a central place in this long and ancient tradition. 'Decentering' (Piaget, 1929) describes the emergence of a 'consciousness of self' as part of a system of logical cognitive observation and 'environmental analysis' in the world like that which underpins science. It is the power of this combined 'arts' and 'scientific' style of pedagogy that Olwig (1991) claims lays a strong foundation for students developing a deeper 'sense of place' as a context for responsible living (Olwig, 1991). It is the development of this kind of 'place attachment' in students that can lead to more environmentally aware and responsible ways of behaving and living in their own context (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001).

While Storythread is still delivered in its traditional excursion format, over the last decade it has evolved to a point where its potential as a concept and tool for supporting classroom pedagogy and school change is now being recognised. The way Chris used Storythread, reflects a broader trend towards using mentored arts approaches to support whole school reform where leaders draw on external agents with arts expertise to help them scaffold and 'mediate' pedagogical and organisational change (Seashore, Anderson, & Riedel, 2003). Results of national and international studies support the idea that involvement in mentored arts-based programs have a positive impact on learning and possibly on academic achievement across the curriculum, particularly where there is a whole school focus (Bryce, Mendelovits, Beavis, McQueen, & Adams, 2004).

To understand how Chris *actively* worked in the school over a nine year period to bring about profound organizational change an explanatory theoretical framework is required. A blending of 'complexity theory' and 'activity theory' allows us to interpret her leadership in retrospect as a learning journey that managed to unlock teacher potential in the school and allowed transformative change to happen.

A Theoretical Framework for Understanding School Leadership, Reform and Organizational Change

There is currently a move away from traditional hierarchical models of school leadership based on command-and-control towards relational and person-centred approaches that are more emotionally tuned and ecologically sensitive (Morrison, 2002). These new models recognize that leadership is about creating supportive contexts for deep learning and that any attempt to bring about organizational change must be a joint 'learning journey' for everyone involved. Transformative leadership is by its very nature constructivist in

intent and practice, and recognizes that deep change and deep learning are inextricably linked. It is only when the members of an organization are able to create personal meaning for themselves as part of a growing learning community that significant change can happen. A combination of complexity theory and activity theory offers new insights into both the complex activity-based nature of schools as organizations and into how a transformative leader might more effectively work to harness, encourage and release the creative potential for change within their school as part of a self-organizing system.

Conditions for a Self-organizing system to emerge

There is now strong evidence that if we treat our organizations as complex living systems, with the capacity to emotionally and cognitively access and share intelligence, then creative and dynamic change will follow. Wheatley (2005) claims there are three key conditions required to create this kind of self-organizing human system. She describes these as a clear sense of identity and purpose based on deep shared values that represent a communities core 'essence' or 'being'; access to relevant new information that makes a real difference and helps people work in a supportive and creative way within an organization; and, strong networked relationships that allow all members to rapidly access and share the intelligence of the whole system when they need it. Mix these together in a spirit of courage, adventure and exploration and you unleash the powerful forces of reform and renewal (Wheatley, 2005). A partnership between complexity and activity theory offers new insights into the dynamics that leaders can access and use when this kind of self-organizing potential emerges and develops.

Complexity theory

Complexity theory provides leaders with insight into the deeper nature of reality and suggests how they might create the conditions to spin a self-organizing system into existence within new or established organizations. It suggests that a leader's primary task is to challenge and inspire those around them to live on the creative edge of chaos (Morrison, 2002) and together cross the edges of fear, complacency and self-doubt that may hold them back. It is the emotional courage to do this that allows individuals and communities to venture into the exciting world of complexity and change. This 'leap of faith', it is argued, will release new levels of creativity, innovation and passion into a system that will generate transformative learning and shared leadership across a whole organization. This approach suggests that when leaders engage others with these natural forces of complexity they discover that the greatest power for change lies within the organization itself. Tap into this and everything shifts.

Activity theory

Activity theory on the other hand provides leaders with insight into how human culture works, and how throughout history individuals and communities have used mentored constructivist type processes and forms of 'mediated action' to generate new 'mental models' (Engestrom, 1999a) and

learning to make the 'leap of faith' less frightening and more achievable. While this may not hold the same emotional appeal as complexity theory it describes the reality that most people experience. We are currently locked inside hierarchical systems that have caused great emotional damage and not everyone is ready to trust in the creative possibilities of a self-organizing system. Having successful 'cultural tools' or 'artefacts' in place, and then using these as part of an 'expansive learning cycle' to support organizational change, can provide individuals with access to a variety of alternative pathways. They may not know the final outcome, but for many teachers who are being asked to start on the challenging journey of professional transformation, access to established 'cultural tools' (Vygotsky, 1978) and processes of 'mediated action' (Wertsch, 1998) can be a very welcome means of supporting their journey into the unknown.

A combined approach

The way Chris instinctively worked in the school created the key conditions for a self-organizing system to emerge. She achieved this in two ways. First, by building a culture of deep trust and respect in the school that helped teachers push through their own barriers of fear and resistance to change. The idea that it was all right to experiment and even fail in their attempts to find the best way ahead was encouraged. I believe this allowed many teachers to make the 'leap of faith' that eventually released new levels of creativity, innovation and passion into the school (Wheatley, 2005). Second, by engaging teachers in an open and playful process of 'mediated action' that used Storythread as an established 'cultural tool' to help teachers move through new expansive learning cycles of change (Engestrom, 1999b). Some teachers rushed ahead of course while others preferred to walk slowly for a range of legitimate reasons. By offering a combination of invitational emotional support and structured mediated action Chris created an effective mix that provided everyone with a space in which to explore new possibilities in their own way as the forces of self-organization gathered momentum.

The Journey

A clear intention and desire to change

This story is about how a courageous principal worked with a group of talented teachers to move a whole school community through a process of change over a nine year period. Deep change takes time and surviving the complexity of the journey is a major achievement. Chris Quinn and her community have transformed the way learning happens in their school through their tenacity and dogged determination to make it happen.

Greenbank State School is a Queensland Government Primary School that was established in 1893 and caters for pre-school to year 7. It is located on the rural/urban fringe of Brisbane in a mid-low socio economic area with almost 1000 students. While it has retained a semi-rural atmosphere through acreage development, it is not an affluent area. Dense urban sprawl is encroaching on its boundaries. The school is located in one of the fastest growing residential

areas in Queensland. The school reform project described here began in 1996 a couple of years after Chris had arrived as Principal. She decided it was time for the school to focus more on the *unique cultural and environmental qualities* of their local area. Chris had two main reasons for encouraging this new direction.

- She wanted to engage students and teachers in deeper forms of learning
- She wanted to give the school a unique marketing and promotional edge

Of these two it was learning that was her main concern. She had looked at the students and asked herself a fundamental question. *What will work with these kids?* Based on her past experience, Chris believed environmental education was a good way to go. She admitted that she didn't know a lot about the approach but she wanted to understand more. This is when I was invited into the school and we started talking about school reform late in 1996.

Searching for a new Identity – a different angle on Environmental Education

As I listened it was obvious that Chris was attracted to environmental education for a number of reasons. It was fun. It was physical and real. It developed community spirit. It gave students and teachers meaning and purpose. It was constructivist to the core and just a great way to teach and learn. As well as this it supported what Chris and many others saw as the core values and identity of the school, i.e. building caring and responsible relationships. By adopting environmental education she wanted to expand these values base beyond a focus on self and others to also include the environment.

Interview with Chris 22.10.99

Learning made fun. That's what I saw as the secret of environmental education... that it was a way to make learning meaningful and fun ... developing a community consciousness, and a community responsibility for ... our school environment, you know, where we live...so I wanted to inculcate that in terms of citizenship for the future ... through environmental curriculum.

But Chris was also concerned that she didn't lock the school into one particular definition of environmental education, at least not at this early stage. She wanted a way of focusing teachers on the concept of environmental learning as a powerful force for change but without backing them into a corner. It took a while to emerge but when Chris heard the words 'Growing a Sense of Place' she grabbed them. They embodied for her what environmental education was all about. Chris knew however that if this idea was to have any credibility it would have to be worked out in the pedagogy and practice of individual teachers.

Interview with Chris 22.10.99

Well I rather liked the concept 'Growing a sense of place'.. I think as a summation of what attitudes and learning we were trying to develop in our kids,... and also in our teachers. And we recognised that the

teachers had to come first, ...that probably the teachers would learn while being the vehicle of bringing the kids on board.

To achieve this she needed to provide them with a way of exploring the idea in a practical and tangible way. The large bushland reserve on the school's boundary seemed to her a good place to start. The school had been unrestricted and sole access to this site.

What to do with that piece of Bushland (1996)

Chris had developed a passionate interest in this bushland area arguing that the school needed to use it more effectively. The area was significant because of its size and diversity of plant and animal life. It was an environmental educators dream. From the moment she arrived at the school Chris knew that one day it would be her launching pad for environmental education. She saw the emergence of the 'Growing a Sense of Place' idea as a metaphor for what could happen in this bushland site.

Interview with Chris 22.10.99

The whole genesis of the thing (Growing a Sense of Place) came from the fact that when I came here I thought this is where I can do environmental education. There was twenty acres of environmental park and all that the school was using it for was an occasional walk through. For me it had to be something more. We had to make learning more meaningful for kids and teaching a more aesthetic experience for teachers.

For Chris though, this area was more than simply a piece of remnant bushland. It was a tool that she could use to reframe how learning happened in the school. She wanted teachers to see environmental education as much more than 'nature study', recognising it as a broad constructivist pedagogy that focused on deep learning in real contexts. Chris had a problem though. Wouldn't focusing on the bushland simply reinforce the 'nature study' approach? Well yes, but this would not be an issue if she could also bring a more aesthetic and cultural perspective into the discussion.

To really understand how Chris was thinking at the time we need to go back to 1989 when she first became involved in a professional learning workshop for graduate teachers called 'Amelia'. This is also when she saw the Storythread approach in action for the first time as the pedagogical process used to frame the Amelia experience. A brief review of both the Amelia Workshop and Storythread is important if we are to understand the reform path that Chris followed and why she was so convinced that this was the best way to go.

Amelia and Storythread – unlocking the passion and the artist within

In 1988 Chris was a curriculum adviser in Brisbane when she became deeply involved in the 'Amelia Project'. The Amelia workshop engaged over three hundred first year teachers in a two day Storythread experience based on the life of a young idealistic

‘nature educator’ in the 1870’s. This ‘environmental story’ carried sophisticated content and ideas that allowed an exploration of issues and problems related to first year teaching. These young teachers stepped into Amelia’s life, became embroiled in her personal struggles and reflected on their own professional journey. This was achieved in two ways.

- By employing an *arts/drama environmental narrative process* that personalized content in real contexts through a series of sequenced inquiry learning steps.
- By employing a *scientific environmental analysis process* of ‘deep listening’ (profound attentiveness) and action research to ground the experience in reality.

Chris claimed that the Amelia experience had encouraged her to ‘let the artist out’ in herself and to think about how she might help others ‘get at the deeper magic and meaning of learning’.

Interview with Chris 28.5.01

It goes back to the Amelia days with ‘Storythread’ where we went down to the creek and it blew me away to see people so willing to engage with nature, to share those emotions and I probably saw that as one of the most powerful teaching experiences that I have ever witnessed... which was just like magic. That was what I wanted. I wanted our kids to feel what I had felt. I wanted teachers to feel that they had the power to do it over and over again.

When she initiated the reform agenda in 1997 she was thinking quite a lot about how she could use a similar approach in the school. She believed that if teachers were able to experience this kind of aesthetic and cultural approach to environmental education, linked to a real context like the bushland area, that they would be hooked just as she had been. To do this though she needed help.

Choosing a Team that was ‘right’ for the School (1997)

Chris had always argued that she could not bring about change on her own. She wanted to draw on the expertise of the teachers in the school, but she was also keen to use external specialists. Chris believed that her ability to sustain the drive for reform depended on her ability to select the best team. In choosing such a team however, she didn’t want to tell teachers what to do. They were the experts in their own classrooms. Her interest lay in finding mentors who could work in partnership with teachers and travel with them as trusted colleagues. She wanted everyone to learn from each other.

Interview with Chris 7.12.04

I am very much the owner of the big idea (but) I steal my big ideas from other people. I go out and get my learning from people, and then I sort of go shopping with what (they) have to offer, and I say. Ah! he’ll be right for me. No she’s not right for me but I’ll have her. She may not know as much as the others, but the others will not work with my teachers. They will tell them what to do, and they will then feel put down, and this whole thing will just be (another) paper exercise. I think the leadership role was in identifying who to invite in and

defining the sort of role that those people might have. If I'd put my trust in the wrong (people) this journey would not have happened.

When Chris invited me into the school to use Storythread as a catalyst for change her decision was based on her direct knowledge of my expertise but also on the fact that she trusted me. But having suggested the school access Storythread she then stressed that for her it was simply a 'tool' that she wanted to use. Her primary goal was to empower teachers to find their own way into environmental education by drawing on the 'environmental narrative' and 'environmental analysis' strands that underpinned Storythread. This was an exciting idea and an opportunity to explore how an external specialist centre might actually support school change. We both felt that the simplest way to begin was to invite teachers to experiment with the Storythread approach by accessing Pullenvale programs. This would provide a common reference point for discussion and reflection. I spoke with the teachers late in 1997. A number booked and the experiment had begun.

Experimenting with Storythread as an established Model (1998 – 2000)

Chris hoped that by introducing Storythread into the school that teachers would adapt and use aspects of this approach to give an extra edge to their environmental education teaching. They didn't have to use Storythread however if they didn't want to. The only requirement laid down by Chris was that teachers incorporate environmental education into their programs and use the adjacent bushland area as a focus. The process began with a few teachers simply exploring Pullenvale's established Storythread programs. What developed out of this though was a ripple effect of interest in environmental education and Storythread that moved across the school community. Teachers who had used the approach were impressed with the way it engaged their students. They shared their enthusiasm. This growing interest in Storythread helped Chris keep the focus on environmental education alive in the school.

Interview with Chris 22.10.99

Teachers who have been involved in using Storythread excursion programs have been really rapt in being part of that process. And I think because that's been happening it has kept the momentum going and it has given me the avenue always to keep talking up our environmental approach to education. These are the citizenship attitudes we are expecting our children to develop to their environment, the qualities we are hoping to send them away with.

This created a space for more discussion about why environmental education was working and why students were so easily engaged through a combined 'environmental narrative' and 'environmental analysis' approach. The real value of using Storythread in this way was that it offered a structured framework that teachers felt comfortable with and that allowed them to experiment with complex ideas and new forms of pedagogy. In this way interest grew in how Storythread might be used more effectively in the school.

But what Chris really wanted was for the school to develop its own unique approach to environmental education, based on the successes of the Storythread experience, while at the same time moving beyond it. She wanted teachers to work with her to create a new curriculum framework. To achieve this however she needed a process. At the end of 2000 Chris asked if I would organise a series of focus sessions in 2001 to draw out what the staff saw as the most useful elements of the Storythread approach. She hoped this would be a starting point for theorizing about environmental education curriculum, pedagogy and learning in the school.

Moving beyond Storythread – (2001)

Throughout 2001 I met with the teachers in a series of early morning focus groups to discuss their experiences with Storythread and environmental education. My brief was to identify what teachers saw as the most powerful generic and transferable elements that they could develop further in their own teaching and unit planning. These were happy and often intense gatherings. After months of struggle I came up with a summary document called ‘Growing a Sense of Place in Greenbank School’ that I felt captured the essence of what had been discussed in the previous sessions. This document focused on two key ideas.

- How to apply a combined *environmental narrative* and *environmental analysis* approach (at the time termed ‘environmental connecting’) to refocus pedagogy on deep learning and problem solving in real contexts.
- How to link this with an inquiry learning sequence based on *deep thinking*, *connecting* to real places, *communicating* personal insights and *responding* through meaningful tasks and projects.

A full staff meeting was called to discuss this document and to decide if it did in fact capture the ‘mind’ of the teachers and the leadership team. What followed was an energetic and dynamic meeting. Chris was both surprised and delighted with the outcome. Up until this point she’d felt that most teachers were willing to go with her, but she was not convinced that they really believed in her environmental education vision. Suddenly there appeared to be almost full engagement with the idea and even qualified support from the conscientious objectors. The shift was rapid and caught Chris by surprise.

The general feeling that came out of this meeting was that the school should flesh out some kind of clear curriculum framework that captured the essence of what was happening in the school. Chris knew she should act immediately to build on this positive feeling but unfortunately sickness intervened and nothing happened until August in the following year. Miraculously though the momentum for change continued, due mainly to the fact that teachers continued to use Pullenvale’s Storythread excursion programs to explore new possibilities in their own classrooms, but also because the processes of self-organization were clearly in play. By default we discovered the great value of having an established vehicle in place that can help maintain the interest in

change when circumstances change and conspire to overwhelm our best laid plans.

The Threat she did not see coming – A moment of crisis (mid 2002)

Early to mid 2002 was not an easy time for Chris. A combination of personal health problems, and other issues meant that apart from continuing to access Pullenvale's Storythread programs, nothing new really happened until August 2002. It was only then that Chris was able to re-engage with the process. While a great deal of progress had been made previously, the school still did not have the clearly articulated Curriculum Framework that had been requested by the teachers in the previous year. Chris knew that she had to draw all the pieces of the puzzle together, and quickly.

She arranged for the District Curriculum Adviser to meet the leadership team to talk about how they might pick up the key threads from earlier discussions and relate these to the Department of Education directive that all schools must develop a Whole School Curriculum Model. Chris arrived late to this meeting and was stunned and shocked by what she heard. The two deputies and the adviser were talking about putting aside all the years of work and simply adopting models from other schools. This was a moment of deep personal challenge and uncertainty for Chris.

As she listened she began to question her own leadership. She was churning inside with anger and disbelief. Why had everything she had worked for been so easily put aside? Her deep fear, as she later admitted, was that she may not have what was required to take the school forward. This thought was however short lived. After reflecting for a while Chris asked why it was not possible for the school to complete what it had already begun. Why on earth were they talking about other models? She then found herself demanding that the school must be given a chance to follow its own pathway and not simply copy others.

This was a critical point for Chris and the school. She realized that she had failed to bring the deputies on board and that she must take full responsibility for this. While she had delegated key managerial areas she had not transferred or shared power at the level of transformational leadership. This realization represented a major breakthrough in how Chris functioned as a leader in the school. She set out to consciously share and distribute leadership across the school in whatever way she could reasonably achieve.

The Think Tank (August 2002)

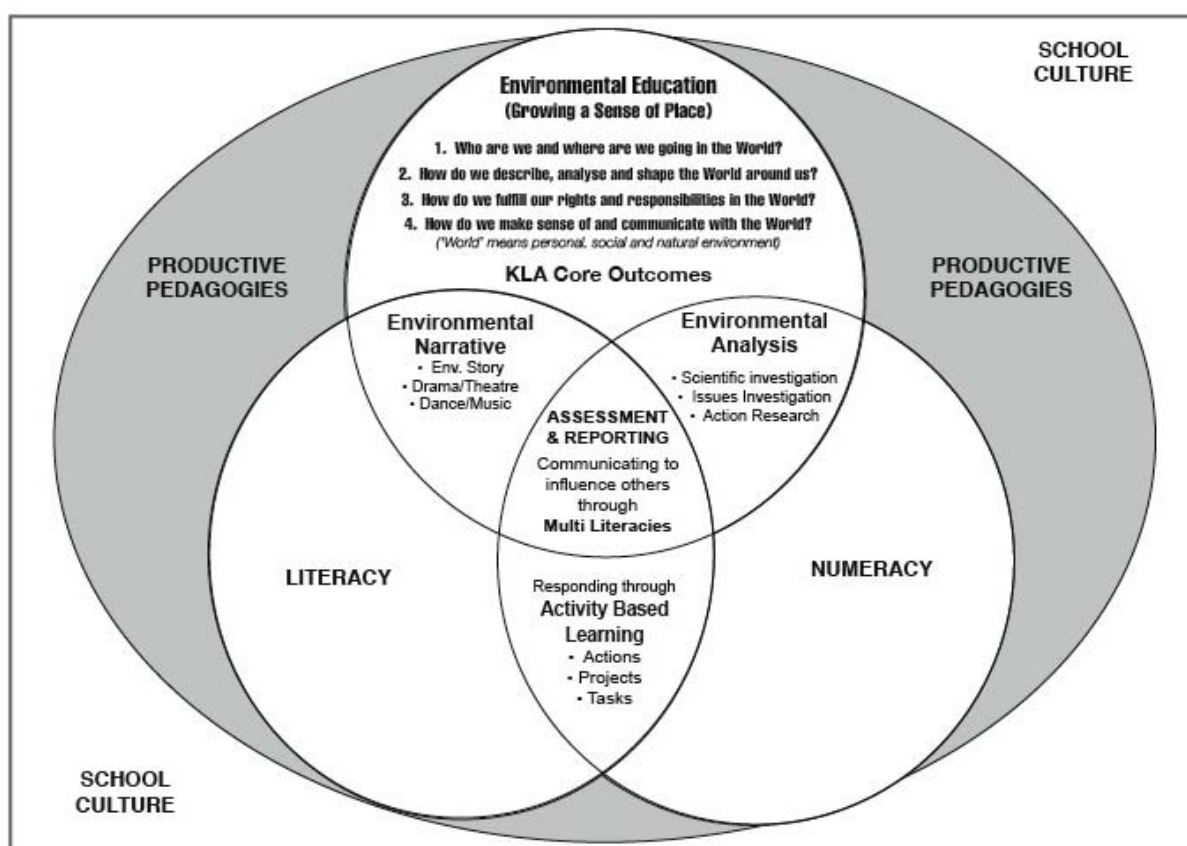
Chris responded immediately and in August 2002 she formed a small planning group of six key people including myself, and the curriculum adviser. She knew this was a break or make situation and made this very clear to everyone involved. The group was locked away for three days of intense thinking and discussion. It was a time when different agenda's struggled against each other until in frustration Chris demanded we find some consensus.

I responded by asking her a simple question. Exactly what kind of people, what kind of human beings are you looking for? What kind of teaching and learning do you want to see happening in this school? She thought for a moment and then reached out and picked up a Queensland Education Departmental *New Basics* document (Queensland, 2000) that was open on the table. Chris then read aloud.

“I want to see students who know who they are and where they are going? Who can make sense of and communicate with the world? Who know about their rights and responsibilities? Who can describe, analyse and shape the world around them? That’s what I want.”

In that moment everything changed. We all realized that these questions might allow all our competing ideas to align. By moving away from a focus on content to inquiry we had liberated the process. A curriculum model began to emerge as if from nowhere as years of thinking came together. Within a few days Chris presented this draft model to a group of teacher representatives who had been selected by their peers to review the planning team’s work. They added new ideas and gave the Model their positive endorsement (see figure 1).

Figure 1 : Greenbank State School Curriculum Model



Over the following weeks these teachers began to push the change agenda in new directions. Things were changing at a rapid pace, with teachers who had been on the fringe suddenly moving to the centre of the action. Chris was stunned by how quickly it had all happened. The school was buzzing and she loved it.

Interview with Chris 20.9.02

I'm flying on a cloud. Environmental education has been affirmed. I wasn't here on Wednesday when the staff had their full and final meeting, but the feedback I've got is really wonderful because of its authenticity. It's the genuineness of the response and the fact that the set of people who we brought in who were nominated, we didn't select them they were nominated, have just taken it on board completely. They have become agents of change. They have become sellers of a product that they seem to be demonstrating a high level of commitment to, which to me is far better than I could possibly have hoped. But I never ever imagined that it would happen this easily or this quickly.

Teachers were using the New Curriculum Model (September 2002)

This draft curriculum model was adopted by the whole staff in September 2002. It was like nothing the school had used before and was clearly far beyond what Chris had expected. Teachers began talking openly with her about the model and how excited they were that the school was moving in this new direction.

Interview with Chris 20.9.02

I had a teacher who came and saw me today who probably doesn't share a whole lot of stuff with me. She sat there and she said, and when I saw that plan, that curriculum framework, I just said yes! This is what I'm on about. So I said to her, so you think this is going to work, and she said oh yes, yes, yes. It's just wonderful, wonderful. And the fact that one of the teachers who was in the group of seven, she went home on the second night and had a planning meeting with her year level, and they spent three or four hours planning that night with that model.

Part of the power of this model was that it had enough structure to give teachers a sense that they were part of the same journey, but was open and loose enough to still give them choice. Chris had managed to create a space in which teachers could reframe their own 'secret stories' of change within the bigger agenda that was now unfolding in the school. If individual teachers had not been able to do this then this model would have meant nothing to them. It would have been just another external imposition that was forced on them.

Late in 2002 Chris funded a series of year level unit planning sessions based on this new Curriculum Model. A 'generic' design framework was created by the Curriculum Adviser and the year level representatives. Over the next three years, as the unit planning sessions became more sophisticated, you could feel

the learning community growing. An important insight from this period was that because the process was mediated, with the Curriculum Model as the final authority, disagreements and personal agendas were more easily managed.

Building a Learning Community & Reculturing the School 2003 – 2005

This Curriculum Model had now become a powerful living artefact that carried authority and weight because it had grown up out of the life of the school itself and was viewed as representing how the teachers are actually working, thinking and feeling. This model now sits at the heart of all the half-day year level unit planning sessions that are a common part of school life.

As a *critical friend* who has supported these planning sessions I have seen a gradual transformation in the way units are conceptualised and implemented. There has been a clear shift away from a strong focus on simply teaching content and themes to a much more constructivist approach that encourages students to access and apply knowledge through problem based inquiry in real situations and contexts. The result has been a noticeable strengthening of the learning community and a re-culturing of the school. The depth of this shift was independently verified in a 2003 by a Departmental Review process.

Interview with Chris 3.12.04

The other thing that's really golden, apart from the obvious excitement about this process, and apart from the fact that I believe I've got the power ... right now to push this agenda through ... what's really important out of this report is ... I've got a huge reinforcement that finally someone has been able to put on paper and prove to me what you and I already knew, what we all knew, but we had no proof about ... that we have in fact re-cultured this school, that the culture is impregnated in all aspects of the organization so you don't just hear it from teachers, you don't just hear it from the principal, you don't just hear it from one group. The guys that did this were just blown away by the depth and the level of impregnation of that commitment to this culture, and how it just kept coming out, and how valued it was within the organization.

What emerged out of this intense period of professional sharing and unit planning was the realization that having a common reference point like the Curriculum Model, one that teachers and leaders can believe in, allowed them to talk with each other in ways that were normally not possible in the everyday business of school life. The Curriculum Model had become a kind of 'external mental mentor' that gave everyone a way of thinking and talking about what they were doing. It created an opportunity for deep professional dialogue across the school that had not really existed in this way before. This allowed the school community to keep discussing, growing and learning.

As more and more units emerged, there was a new 'buzz' and 'energy' in the school. Chris worked hard to facilitate a gradual transfer of leadership to key teachers in the hope that personal and ownership would follow, and it did. But

even as Chris enthusiastically promoted the new curriculum model, and encouraged this transfer leadership, she feared for the long-term survival of the process. Chris knew something was missing but was unsure what it was. Her meeting with two leadership consultants gave her glimpse of what it might be.

With their help Chris initiated a new process of 'organisational visioning and alignment' that focused on clarifying the implicit core values of the school that everyone alluded to but which had never been made explicit. These values were then presented in written form and described as Greenbank's 'school wide pedagogy'. As part of this same process a new vision statement 'Creating a World of Difference' was also created. This 'Vision' and 'School Wide Pedagogy' statements, with the 'Curriculum Model', were all drawn into a single new model that identified a single global outcome as the final destination for the school. It read as follows.

To 'Grow a strong Sense of Place' that sustains deep emotional and intellectual connections between Self, Others and Place for the benefit of the whole learning community.

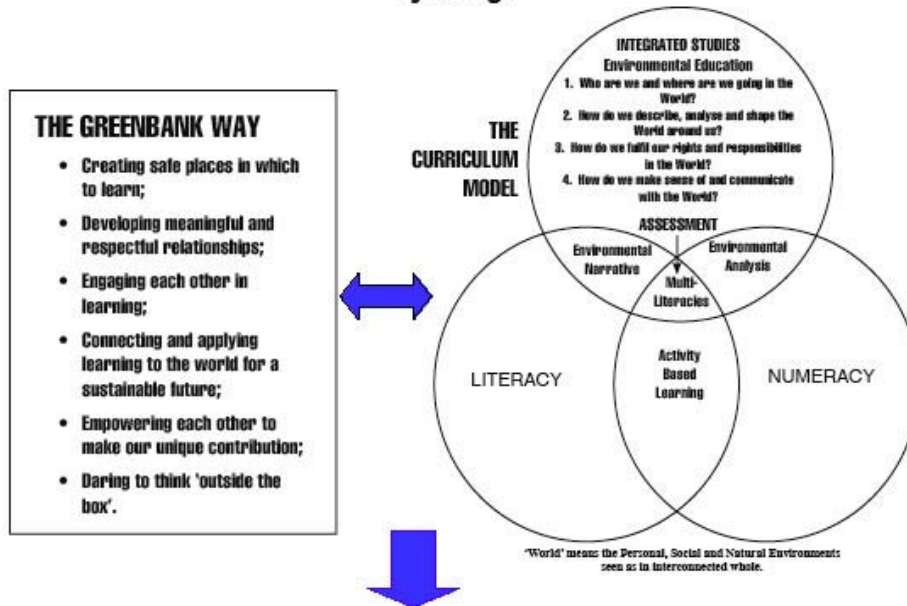
After nine years the school had given deep meaning to those original words, 'Growing a Sense of Place', that Chris had pinned to her display board in 1997.

GREENBANK A SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL

is

***‘Creating a World of Difference –
The Greenbank Way’***

and
**Unlocking the Promise
by using:**



To help students and teachers reach the 'Real Life'
Outcome and Destination Point of *sustainability*
through:

**Building a strong 'Sense of Place' that
sustains deep emotional and intellectual
connections between Self, Others and
Place for the benefit of the whole learning
community.**

Conclusion

Creating deep change requires shared leadership, the building of trusted relationships and the courage to dance at the creative and dangerous edge of chaos. How well leaders do this, how sensitively they choose and manage mediating tools, and how successfully they engage the passion and commitment of teachers, will in the end decide the fate of any innovation and its viability as a new form of practice. Chris was successful in all of these areas primarily I believe because she managed to live between two worlds: one chaotic and full of surprise and the other based on mediated action. She

did this by drawing on her own emotional intelligence to help her determine and judge what was in and what was out. This made all the difference to her ability to make key decisions that in the end created the prime conditions for a self-organizing system to emerge in the school. Because of this the reform process is now delivering the kind of deep learning (Fredricks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004) that Greenbank State School has been seeking for so long.

In a practical sense Chris achieved change by using ‘environmental narrative’ and ‘environmental analysis’ as pedagogical tools to focus students and teachers on a sensuous, joyful exploration of the world around them while recognizing that deep understanding is always born out of the tension and discussion generated as learners engage with the complexity and chaos of life. By immersing students and teachers in this kind of rich aesthetic and analytical tradition, Chris helped them develop a deeper understanding and experience of place. Her staff are now attempting to give meaning to these ideas in the school as part of an unfolding ‘re-entering’ and ‘decentering’ approach independently of Storythread.

Mixing an arts and scientific approach in this way is supported by current research into the ability of the arts to support and impact significantly on academic achievement across other mainstream curriculum areas (Deasy, 2002; Eisner, 1999; Hetland & Webb-Dempsey, 2001). Chris always hoped that student learning and academic achievement would improve as a result of the reform process: there is now some evidence that this combined approach has delivered this. There has also been an increase in the number of teachers interested in understanding how a dual arts and scientific approach might help students see the world around them with fresh and more ‘profoundly attentive’ eyes (Clark, 2002).

Through this research project I have seen first hand the depth of change that a combined arts and scientific approach can support when linked to a key concept like ‘Growing a Sense of Place’, and, when implemented by a leader who lives and works in a learning zone between the worlds of ‘complexity’ and ‘mediated action’. This study also suggests that there may be an alternative way of theorizing about environmental education and sustainability that is based on insights into why ‘environmental narrative’ and ‘environmental analysis’ are so useful in helping students and teachers engage with the intersection point between culture and nature: between human activity and biological complexity. Perhaps, this can provide educational leaders with a foundation for exploring a new approach to sustainable education (Sterling, 2001).

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