Progressive Education:

The Lived Experiences Of Currambena School

(1969 to 2001)

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ABSTRACT

We all tell stories to explain events that occurred during the day; share histories of families, explain our relationships. Storytelling and narratives provide an understanding as to "how experience may be studied and represented" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1997:81). This report is a phenomenological case study using narrative inquiry. It explores people's experiences, from 1969 to present, of a progressive school in Sydney called Currambena.

This study initially explores definitions of alternative and progressive education, before reviewing existing research on people's experiences of schools. It then presents storied experiences, from various members of the Currambena community. Participants' stories from each decade were re-written into composite narratives to represent outstanding themes of each era. The findings that emerged from each decade are then explored, discussed and analysed. In the last section, limitations of this study and suggestions for further research are discussed before making final concluding comments.

This research illustrates the positive and negative experiences of Currambena and how people's opinions and experiences of it have changed over the years, as it has (or has not) responded to its surrounding society. It attempts to provide both the present school community and the wider audience with an insight into the characteristics and flaws of a progressive school. But more significantly, it invites readers to make their own connections between the stories and their experiences of education, in hope that they will take away a deeper understanding of alternative approaches and philosophies of education.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH.

Alternative and Progressive Education Defined

The different approaches to schooling attempt to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse society. Aside from government schools, the choice of schools in Australia includes private, religious, creative art and

farm/agricultural schools. These schools may focus on particular methods or subjects to meet the needs of individual students' cultural or religious beliefs, or communities. However, despite the fact that they do provide an alternative to the public system, their approaches and techniques are not 'alternative' in the same way that for example, Steiner, Montessori and Currambena are. These schools are regarded as alternative as they provide alternative structures, approaches and philosophies to the education of children.

Expressions such as 'radical', 'free', and 'progressive' have been used interchangeably throughout the literature to describe schools, that in one way or another, offer an alternative to what is conceptualised as an authoritarian system of education. These terms all fall under the bigger umbrella of alternative education (Barrow, 1978; Illich, 1971; Lawson and Petersen, 1972; Graubard, 1974; Neill, 1992).

Currambena has been described as an example of a 'progressive' school (Lawson and Peterson 1972 and Currambena, 1994). Progressive schools grew from the "radical dissatisfaction with traditional practice" (Darling, 1994:2). Progressive education is ultimately concerned with the progress of the child, socially, emotionally, physically and educationally as opposed to focusing solely on academic recognition and achievement (Lawson and Petersen, 1972 and Sharp and Green, 1975). Progressive education not only concerns itself with the progress of the child but also with the progress of society.

The Emergence of Progressive Education

Whether the impetus for child-centred education grew from a concern about the challenges of an industrial society, a need for more child centred learning, or an attempt to rebuild society along more enlightened lines after the First World War, the 1920s and 1930s saw the beginning of the Progressive Education Movement (Darling, 1994 and Silberman, 1972).

In the twentieth century, American Philosopher Dewey was the main figure in progressive education. He defined education in terms of maximum individual growth in a co-operative society (Lawson and Petersen, 1972). Dewey's emphasis was on a whole new approach to subject and school organisation that focused on experience, self-directed activity, problem solving and shared responsibility.

The concern to reform education was not only apparent in England and America, but was widespread. Steiner schools reached Australia in the 1950s.

1960s 1970s

Largely due to the events of the Depression and the Second World War, interest in progressive education declined. It was rekindled again until the 1960s and 1970s. During this period there was considerable growth towards an alternative approach. For example, two landmark policy statements about the development of child-centred education in Britain were the Primary Memorandum in 1965 and the Plowden Report in 1967. Both saw a growing acceptance by teachers of an education based on the needs and interests of the child. The focus was also on individualising teaching and working in small groups.

Currambena In Context.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Australia sat in the sun of economic security and high employment, (Smith and Lovat, 1990) and so the education system focused on concerns for "justice and equity in schools and classrooms" (Smith and Lovat, 1990:181). The idea of "development of all individuals to their fullest potential" (Smith and Lovat, 1990:182) was fostered along with the freedom to incorporate the ideals of alternative theories into schooling.

Progressive schools in Australia multiplied throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Such schools included in Sydney were Kinma (1972), Yinbilliko (1971) and more significantly Currambena (1969) which, because it was established earlier, became a parent school from which the others grew.

Currambena was founded by a group of nine people made up of parents, teachers and academics in a 1969, although it was not until January 1970, that it opened as a school. It was set up to be a "learning community, which allowed children to participate in decision-making and to learn responsibility" (Currambena Chronicle, 1999:1). Those behind the school set out to challenge the conventional methods of education by breaking away from orthodoxy (Currambena, 1994). The school became a place where children were treated as individuals, and where teachers had an underlying respect for the students' quality of life in all areas of their development (Currambena, 1994 and Currambena Chronicle, 1999). It is therefore not surprising that over the years it has been described as child-centred, open and community-orientated (Currambena, 1994 and Currambena Chronicle, 1999). These features are strong characteristics of progressive schools of which Currambena is an example.

People's Experiences Of Schools

There has also been little written on people's experiences of non-traditional schools, let alone progressive ones (Bremer and von Monschzisker, 1971; Graubard, 1972 and Heckman, 1996). However, there has been ample written of people's experiences of schools in general. (For example, Green, 1968; Fitzgerald, 1976; Meade, 1981 to name but a few).

The findings including a variety of experiences from Teachers, Students and Parents of non-traditional schools. Most experiences were presented as personal accounts, reflections or anecdotes. In contrast, research into mainstream schools has generally been recorded in more traditional styles of graphs and tables (Campbell, 1975; Meade, 1981; Herndon, 1985; Schools Council, 1992 and Mitchell, 1997). Reports in these cases generally expressed a lack of enthusiasm towards schooling.

Research undertaken on teachers', students' and parents' experiences of school, serves an important purpose. Being exposed to people's stories provides other participants and readers, with an opportunity to share and learn from a variety of experiences, give and gain support, reflect on areas of significance and develop a further understanding of an issue or phenomenon.

WHY I UNDERTOOK THE STUDY

I had no research questions to this study. I was purely interested in finding out about people's experience of Currambena and what readers and the school's community could learn from them. The following explains why I chose to investigate Currambena.

In the mid to late 1970s I attended Currambena School, an Aboriginal word meaning 'Happy Place'. I spent approximately five years there and have very fond memories of my education during that time. In the early 1980s my family left Australia and moved to England where I attended a London based government school. The two worlds could not have been more different. Yet, I survived as did my siblings. We learnt the ropes of our new school, played the rules, adopted the North London accent and all along had the confidence within ourselves to know that we could manage. Academically we were not at a disadvantage and our social skills helped us to adapt. However, my unhappy experiences in the latter school stuck with me. In 1994 I was back visiting Australia and found myself attending Currambena's 25th Birthday celebration. As I sat in the 'dust bowl' (now the basket ball court), I was reminded of the sort of education Currambena provided. As I spoke to people about my experiences there, it came to me

that one of the reasons I wanted to become a primary school teacher, was to give children the experience of schooling that I had at Currambena and not the kind that I experienced in London. To this day, I have been fascinated as to why Currambena meant so much to me and why, when I went back in 1994, I still sensed that feeling of happiness in and around the classrooms. Furthermore, I wanted to find out how others had experienced the school and to allow those stories to be shared. So in March 2000, I made another visit to the school, but this time not to be lost in self indulgent rosy memories, but as researcher (well, a novice one). At the beginning, I wondered if I was trying to close a chapter on my life by studying Currambena but I was aware how relevant this research would be to me as a beginning teacher. I wanted to look at this school with new eyes and be challenged by all that it held, to learn from people's experiences and to be able to question and to develop my own educational philosophies. I wanted to look beyond the square I may have lived in, to push the boundaries of my comfort zones and to really explore why Currambena had (and still does have) such an impact on me and was my 'Happy Place'.

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN

My project is a phenomenological case study using narrative inquiry techniques. I worked under the interpretative paradigm as my area of study focuses on the subjective world of people's experiences. Therefore, my research methods are of a qualitative nature.

That is to say:

- My area of research is nested in the theoretical orientation of phenomenology as the emphasis of the research is on people's experiences.

- Case study was an appropriate choice of methodology to use given that my interest was to investigate participants' experiences of one school.

- Narrative inquiry is a way of characterising the phenomena of human experience. I aimed to provide the opportunity for people's storied experiences to be expressed.

METHODS OF DATA GATHERING

The methods of data collection I have employed include archival documents, a collection of narratives from various participants and un-structured interviewing.

Archival Material

The archival material I collected was in the form of written stories. These stories came from a book compiled by Dr. David Cohen, one of the principal founders of the school, called "The Currambena Experience" (1980). Cohen attempted to present people's experiences of the school from its beginning in 1969 to 1980. The stories, written by teachers, parents, children and advisors, not only provided me with historical information about Currambena, but revealed people's experiences of the school in its earlier days. I read the whole book and sorted the stories into the following categories: negative experiences, positive experiences, student, parent, teacher and advisor. I then selected every second story from each category to use in the thesis.

Written Stories

I asked a number of people, whose involvement in Currambena spanned three decades (1970 to present), to write about their experiences of the school. To present a broad cross-section of people whose experiences would represent different temporal and political stages of the school I took several different approaches. Initially, I put an advertisement in the school newsletter, explaining my study and asking if people would like to participate. There was little response from this method, which led me to approach parents in the playground. Every Wednesday and Friday afternoon over a period of three weeks I approached parents, in different areas of the playground, who were waiting to collect their children. This proved to be more successful in gathering people's interest. In addition to this, I approached a random sample of people from past and present parent lists. This was done by selecting every fourth name on the lists. I was then fortunate enough to be given names of other parents, students and teachers by a number of people who had already agreed to contribute. Finally, I contacted people I already knew from my time at Currambena.

Participants' narratives allowed me to explore the phenomena of their experiences and to gain a better understanding of themes that emerged. It was also interesting to see how these themes compared with previous literature on alternative schooling. For this reason, the narratives make up the main part of my data.

Interviews

The use of interviews in my study served two purposes. Firstly, for those participants who preferred not to write usually because of time restraints, an interview provided them with the freedom to speak and reveal their experiences. Secondly, they brought about clarity to confused aspects of written narratives. For example, they were a means of exploring and gaining knowledge, in order to develop a further understanding of participants' experiences (Van Manen, 1997). In the first instance, I interviewed eight people. In general, participants' written narratives were so detailed and explicit that interviews to bring about clarity were only necessary in two cases.

The interviews conducted ranged from more formal structured questioning to informal, unstructured conversation (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994; Yin, 1994). For both purposes, I followed the suggestion of McDonald and Sanger (1982 in Powney and Watts, 1987) of adopting an unstructured interview technique as I did not know what line of questioning I would pursue, until I had started speaking to the participant, or had seen what information was available.

How the Composite Stories were Devised

Having read through the narratives and listened to the taped interviews, I highlighted the main themes that ran through each era or that stood out as being unique. I then tallied the themes that appeared throughout the decade's stories. For example, the majority of participants' experiences from the 1970s included the notion of "freedom". Having worked out what themes would be included, by looking at the results of the tally, I wrote an aggregate of responses to each decade. Thus, I was able to compile a single narrative that represented the main themes of each decade from 1969 to the present day.

The next stage was to decide on the format for each story. The construction of the text in the narratives is part of the phenomenological research process. That is, phenomenological writing enables readers to make connections with the described experiences, in order to allow for a deeper meaning or understanding of the phenomenon (Smith, 1998). I chose to juxtapose the style and content in an effort to engage the reader. This technique directs the readers to reflect on these experiences and their own, so to provide them with an opportunity to explore aspects of the phenomenon that were not previously considered (Smith, 1998). For this reason, I presented the phenomena of the Currambena experience using script writing, emotive descriptions and the use of different voices within one text. For example, in the Readers Theatre script, I

hope the multitude and diversity of voices and opinions expressed in this form assists the reader in visualising the scene. This allows for not only 'lived experiences' to come alive, but also the reader to become more involved. In another example, a story is told from four different perspectives. This idea was based on Anthony Browne's book "Voices in the Park" (1998). Each character in the book tells the same story, but from their point of view. This allows the reader to gain different perspectives of the events that take place.

DATA ANALYSIS

In narrative inquiry, there are two types of analysis: analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. Analysis of narratives looks at the stories and moves to common elements within them. From here the common themes form the focus of discussion about the phenomenon being explored. Narrative analysis moves in the other direction, from the elements to the stories (Goodfellow 1995). The purpose is to "produce stories as the outcome for the research" (Polkinghorne, 1995:15). The information for the stories comes from varying sources including historical accounts, personal documents etc. All the data used is then integrated and "interpreted by an emplotted narrative" (Polkinghorne, 1995:15). In this study I used both approaches.

Firstly, to present participants' overall experiences of Currambena, I took common or outstanding elements embedded within the stories of each decade and constructed them into a composite narrative to represent an aggregate of responses. This is a clear example of narrative analysis. The second approach I used was analysis of narratives. I searched for recurring elements in the narratives and wrote about them in the findings chapter entitled "Bringing it all Together".

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Main themes that occurred:

	READERS THEATRE (1969 to 1980)	70s	80s	90s	PRESENT (2001)
CHILD CENTRED EDUCATION	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
TEACHERS (Roles/ parental knowledge and effort)	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT	✔	✔			✔
STRUCTURE DISCIPLINE	✔	✔	✔	✔	
ACADEMICS and SOCIAL LEARNING	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
DEMOCRACY OF SCHOOL	✔	✔		✔	✔
FREEDOM (of choice)	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
INFLUENCE ON PAST STUDENTS		✔	✔		
FRIENDSHIP BONDS			✔	✔	✔

[Figure - missing]

Both of the above figures demonstrate clearly that child centred education has been a prominent theme of this study. The following areas of child centred education featured in most stories and were supported by earlier research into progressive education.

- Students and Teachers as Equals
- Community
- Relevant Learning Experiences

Other main themes that occurred frequently in the study were, Freedom and Academic and Social Learning.

Freedom can play a more challenging role in progressive schools. The 'web' links freedom to democracy

which in turn links to some participants' concerns over the lack of 'true' democracy in council meetings. In practice, decision making at these meetings is fundamental to any true democratic institution. Yet, in the 1990s story, parents expressed issues of conflict in council meetings between staff and parents in relation to change and loss of control.

The notion of academic attainment levels within progressive schools is a frequently mentioned topic among child theorists and their critics (Illich, 1971; Lawson and Peterson, 1972; Graubard, 1974; Barrow, 1978; and Darling, 1994). The crux of the debate between academic and social learning is how to get a balance between the two, that guarantees maximum child growth and learning. This was a contentious issue at Currambena.

Own Interpretations of the Findings

If I were to draw a graph, with a range of positive to negative experiences on the 'y' axis and the time span of thirty-two years on the 'x' axis, this is what I would envisage: I feel that in essence Currambena's golden days were in the late 1960s through to the mid 1980s. Despite "The Split" in the early days, where the gradient of the graph line would trough before peaking again, the overall feel of the school was one of great contentment. From the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s, I see the graph line gradually declining, with perhaps a few peaks and troughs until it reached the mid to late 90's where it would be sitting at its lowest, most negative grading. The stories received during this time expressed the most negative experiences of all the decades. However, I feel the gradient would begin to peak again after the late 1990s, and sit where I believe it is now, on a happier, more positive inclining gradient.

In essence, participants' stories have shed light on how a progressive school has developed and changed over the years as a result of its surrounding society. It has shown that through the late 1960s to the mid 1980s it has reflected society's move into more 'liberating' schooling. However, after the mid 1980s, Australia's decline in economic growth and rise in youth unemployment saw a new dominant ideology which impacted heavily on the education system. The curriculum was to become more centralised, "with more tightly pre-specified outcomes and controlled by externally set and scored multiple-choice-type State or National testing programs" (Smith and Lovat, 1990:187 quoting Metherell, 1989). Features of progressive schools, such as community-based decision-making and the opportunity to develop alternative courses, disappeared. As a result, schools which were perhaps more relaxed in their approach to teaching the academics of education, now had to meet state guidelines in order to continue to function as an educational 'institution'. These external pressures challenged the school's learning philosophies and 'academic' attainment levels through the 1980s and 1990s, which the graph line indicates. Now, I feel, the gradient is peaking again. The present day stories reflect this. Fundamentally, through all its challenging times, I firmly believe just by looking at figure 1 and 2 that Currambena has remained true to its initial child centred ideologies regardless of its peaks and troughs.

In conclusion, no one school and no one system is suitable for every student. Not every technique of management or form of conflict resolution is going to be one hundred percent successful for every individual child. There will always be those who try and work a system to their advantage. There will always be parents who, justifiably, will want more for their children. Choosing the right school is a matter of parents working out what suits them and their child. It is a matter of parents finding out what the school offers and matching that to the agendas they have for their children. Perhaps too, at Currambena, it is a matter of parents allowing themselves to see not what *they* need as a parent or what they think their child should have, but what their *child* needs and how their child learns. It is then perhaps a case of deciding if you like and trust the system enough to learn with them.

CRITICAL REFLECTION/EVALUATION OF MY WORK.

This study has been successful in presenting contributors' experiences of Currambena and discussing findings. However this was done within limits. One of the major limitations was time. Additional months would have allowed for the following:

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- Extra time for participants to respond. Many people said they were interested but were unable to afford the time, to write or be interviewed.
- Further follow-up interviews and more communication with participants in regards to their thoughts of the first draft.
- An extensive search for a broader selection of participants over the thirty-two years. This would have allowed me to work with a more equal balance of; age ranges, teacher, student or parent representatives and time periods.

Having more time to address the above would have perhaps provided a deeper understanding of people's experiences of Currambena and prompted further important issues to be considered by the school's community and readers. However, if I were to undertake the study again, in the same amount of time, there would be little I would change. It has been a mammoth task to collect, read and analyse data, but one that has definitely been worthwhile. I think it is important to present a variety of findings in order to express a broad cross-section of experiences. The problem with this, within my time limits, is that it does not allow for an in-depth analyse of each issue. Therefore, if I were to make one change I would consider presenting a smaller amount of findings in a more precise way to give a deeper insight into themes.

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