Chapter 6
Looking Back to Move Forward

Participatory action research was an obvious choice of methodology for this study. Not only is it the methodology of choice in education contexts, but this form of research is particularly recommended in cross-cultural research with aboriginal peoples across the world (Ball & Pence 2001; 1999; Boughton 2001; Dahlberg et al 1999; Gibbon 2002; Haig-Brown 2001; Haig-Brown & Archibald 1996; Kemmis & MacTaggart 2000). For example, participatory action research was espoused by Kemmis and MacTaggart (2000) as an effective method of collaboratively examining practices in educational settings and changing approaches to understanding the process, such as at Batchelor College in the Northern Territory.

My original project was to investigate workplace training in an Aboriginal context, which was modified when a new research question of greater relevance emerged: How can an external quality assurance process be used to enhance learning and organizational change in an Aboriginal early childhood workplace?

At Kulai a significant part of the journey involved navigating new routes in partnership with the preschool team and tracing individual and team journeylines to reveal new meanings. As I look back to summarise what happened in this study a range of things become apparent. They include the political forces that impacted on the community and wider society, the way people (internal and external to Kulai) responded to these pressures, the physical changes to the environment including structural and aesthetic differences, the program and policy changes, the environment, plus theories and instruments that resonated with our thinking and sought to frame our actions. The above, recorded in text and maps, represents a selection of the total picture. It felt uncomfortable to patch together these ideas into a sequential list because they all intersected, overlapped and operated in interdependent ways.

When I tried to think and analyse from a position overarching the whole organisation, a web emerged, and each segment sent off threads to every other part of the mass. There seemed only to be blurred edges to define where this mass

might end as it kept reaching into new pockets and pulling back from others like the living organism it represented. This image of the web enabled me to move back and forth to gain different perspectives.

The complexity of this vision had been underestimated in my thinking and reading. Now I began to understand why Buell and Cassidy (2001) had alerted the profession of the need to examine, rather than blindly accept, the complexities of quality issues in early childhood. This multi-focused view also affirmed Sumsion's (2001) call to illuminate aspects of early childhood practice that often remain hidden. The need to reconceptualise our understanding of the way adults operate in early childhood settings as prompted by Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia project, and later by Jipson and Kessler (Jipson 2001) became particularly relevant. So did Dalhberg, Moss and Pence's (1999) recommendation to move beyond a fixation on quality to explore meaning-making in early childhood. From a repositioning my thinking into Homi Bhabha's (1990; 1994) third space the potential for dialogue to open up meaning-making became evident in this research.

These factors made me more conscious that this piece of writing could tell only a fraction of the overall story of Kulai's journey with quality assurance. It would only be possible to analyse a limited range of issues. Emerging as most significant was a new understanding of how meaning was made amongst adults in this early childhood community, in the process of implementing the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS).

I seized the opportunity to dialogue with, and read Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders viewpoints such as espoused by Julie Carey (personal communications 1999-2003), John Lester (1999), Chrissiejoy Marshall (personal communications 1999-2003), Martin Nakata (1999), Raymattja Marika (1999), Dianne Roberts (personal communications 1999-2003), and Errol West (1998). They made me question further my understanding of how meaning was made, particularly in Aboriginal organisations. I learnt that the struggle experienced with the diversity of approaches used by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal meaning-makers was not new. These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders researchers had refocused understandings and approaches to education amongst their peoples and more broadly.

International non-Aboriginal researchers like Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence (1999), bell hooks (1994), Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000), and Georg von Krogh, Kazulo Ichijo and Ikujiro Nonake (2000) helped to challenge me and update my ideas about meaning-making. Some Anglo-Australian thinkers who have contributed to reconceptualising my understanding in the field of education include Stephen Billet (2002; 2001a), Brent Davis (1996), Bill Green (1999), Cathryn McConaghy (1997; 2000; 2002), Kerith Power (2002a & b); Jo-Anne Reid (2002); Margaret Somerville (2002; 1999; 1995); and Dennis Sumara (1999). They have all significantly influenced my thinking, through a process of dialoguing with their text, and in most cases in person, around the concept of meaning-making in education.

An examination of the quality assurance literature led me to attempt to construct a table of objective and subjective aspects of early childhood education. This exploration made apparent the false divisions that perhaps have been amongst the root causes of much conflict since the inception of the profession (Brennan 1998; Carmichael 2002; Clyde 1980; Fenney 1987; Mellor 1990; Weber 1970). Inserting Pence's (2001) m-i-n-d field, as a third column in the genealogy, allowed me to realise no early childhood practices were entirely "objective", nor any entirely "subjective". My move from thinking in terms of dichotomies to thinking in dialectical terms might be characterized as a move from "either/or" thinking to "never either, always both" thinking (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000).

In this thesis I also looked broadly at the challenge of organisational change, using aspects of Indigenous research and participatory action research as frames of reference. Ladson-Billings' (2000: 271-272) advice helped in this process:

> The paradigm shifts that are occurring in qualitative research are both about representation and beyond representation … [we] must shed the bonds of rigid paradigms and stand in new relationship to knowledge, the knower, and the known. The position of alterity [being other or different] – the liminal – is not a privileged position, but it is an advantaged one … No technical-rational approach to this work would yield the deeply textured, multifaceted work I attempt to do.

Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2000) words speak to me of the emerging organic nature of the experiences of organizational change seen at Kulai. These words recognize a shifting of ground from the rigid objectivity of the VET sector competency structures and the application of principles associated with QIAS. At Kulai we could have been constrained by the objectivity of these tools. Rather we entered into meaning-making relationships and discarded the VET competencies. QIAS ultimately became a lever that we could use in our own way within the preschool. When we repositioned to become critical participant action researchers this enabled us to "under[stand] and interpret[ed] differently" (Kemmis & MacTaggart 2000:578). We worked with the objective elements of QIAS to achieve Kulai's subjective needs. Ladson-Billings (2000) describes our way of operating as taking the liminal perspective:

> This work of the liminal perspective is to reveal the ways that dominant perspectives distort the realities of the other in an effort to maintain power relations that continue to disadvantage those who are locked out of the mainstream. This liminal perspective is the condition of the dominant order's self-definition that "can empower us to free ourselves from the 'categories and prescriptions' of our specific order and from its 'generalized horizon of understanding'" (Wynter 1992: 27 cited in Ladson-Billings (2000: 263).

When the research began Julie and I located ourselves as third person participant action scientists (Kemmis and MacTaggart's 2000). From this hierarchical position we endeavoured to apply the QIAS instrument. We stood some distance from the staff, directed the operation and observed what happened. Staff appeared to listen but did not act on our explanations of the potential linkages of Kulai to the research project. Reflecting on these outcomes it became apparent that little or no change was occurring. Rather, resistance and conflict were building, and as a consequence some staff attended, yet avoided engagement in activities.

We had to confront our failures and find ways to respond constructively to this situation (Cannon & Edmondson 2001). At Kulai when there was no trust and no reciprocity, the relationships formed were only at the level of superficial engagement. Without authentic meaning-making partnerships suggestions of

changes to practice were resisted and dismissed. Mapping the interactions of staff in significant events identified in a visible form the outcomes of such activities. What we learnt from a critique of the turbulence was the need to try different approaches. This led us to experiment with operating collaboratively with staff.

When Julie and I acted to reposition ourselves we began to operate on the floor of the program and act in the first-person. We had moved to a position of critical participant researchers, which Kemmis and MacTaggart's (2000) conceptualised as their fifth perspective of participatory action research. This brought positive engagement from most staff and (re)alerted Julie and I to the integral role of relationships and trust in the learning process.

Dialogue at Kulai came to centre around the intent of the mainstream principles in QIAS. The prescription to comply with the QIAS principles was transformed into a mechanism to be manipulated and reshaped to meet local needs. Ultimately this largely freed us to work with and stretch our practices to meet the "categories and prescriptions" of QIAS for review day. As the tension was released, post accreditation, Kulai moved to a position that met with the local community's perceptions of a quality service for their children. These experiences enabled me to understand *"[p]ractice as reflexive,* [and its need] *to be studied dialectically"* as recommended by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000: 578). In electing to use participatory action research as a methodology it allowed situations to

> emerge[s] when people want to think "realistically" about where they are now, how things came to be that way, and, from these starting points, how, in practice things might be changed (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000: 573).

We had experimented and tossed around new ideas by responding to challenges in the midst of turbulence at Kulai. These approaches only became integrated into the preschool program after considerable periods of enactment and associated dialogue. By working together through these experimental phases we moved between the objective and subjective elements of quality assurance. This enacted changes to a range of practices, including the context, curriculum, learning techniques and administration of the preschool. In the m-i-n-d field a new confidence emerged, an openness to creative forces and sharing experiences of

meaning-making (Pence 2001). There was space and freedom there, and at the same time compelling attractors that kept interactive turbulence going. It was in the turbulent space-in-between where relationships were enacted to do the work of experimenting with new ideas. Kulai people were able to cope with some confusion and instability whilst using the forces available to keep generating new ideas and practices because of the power of interrelationships.

Metaphors and rituals were key elements in the formation of bridges at Kulai. In the early stages food sharing played a critical role in blurring cultural boundaries to establish relationships of trust. This connection with food as a symbol of trust continued throughout the project, facilitating other bridges to function. For example, when the banksia as QIAS was introduced, dialogue began about professional practices. This dialogue extended further as Julie and I assumed roles of pollinators as mentors. From an immersed coparticipant position in the preschool we were part of the enaction of learning and changing. The metaphors altered our understanding of the meaning-making process at least as much as they did anyone else's.

In an unexpected way metaphors emerged as vital to communication. Most metaphors used forged a link with the local ecology and created multiple ways to help us understand the dynamics of this small, yet complex organisation. Metaphors allowed us to have frames for knowing, to create evocative images, to clarify interpretations and to move to more accessible forms of knowledge.

I became conscious that metaphors only ever presented a partial picture of reality, sometimes distorted to emphasise the positive elements and to privilege one ordering of facts over others. This meant I had to find a way to cope with the consequence of concepts being presented in pure and simple ways, while obscuring the paradoxes and ambiguities. As each metaphor was stretched to its limits of usefulness energies were generated by movements in the space-in-between the positive and negative transformative powers embraced (Hartley 2002).

By seizing the power of such paradoxes, metaphors opened up understandings and enacted meaning-making at Kulai. Each metaphor that was introduced, from food and the research plan, through to the tributary river, acted to build up

understanding. Each contributed more layers to our earlier understandings. Investigating the theories behind metaphors and using metaphors creatively at Kulai developed my awareness of the advantages and limitations of metaphor in meaning-making.

Working in between the polarizations we manipulated, stretched and released each metaphor at Kulai to its limits of usefulness. Each one stretched and reshaped to meet our immediate needs. Before the point of overstretching, where elasticity was lost, or cliché status was reached, I moved on or overlapped a new metaphor. An example of this was seen as the pollinator as mentor intersected with the banksia as QIAS metaphors, to extend the metaphor's functional life. In this way it was possible to engage more fully with the particular stage of the process.

The metaphors provided bridges to build relationships, communication and learning. The metaphors opened up dialogue around unfamiliar subjects, by injecting familiar images. We were all able to see things from different perspectives, such as when the tree became a preschool and the preschool moved ground in becoming a tree. Experiencing this process for the first time transformed ways of thinking for each of us to another level.

My first mapping of the research journey as a stream moving through the landscape was dotted with the significant events of the research period. When I superimposed sheets of acetate film marked with the phases of accreditation, the impact of food sharing, how voice was used, abused and silenced, became more apparent. I began to visualise the multiple layers emerging from the data. Working with the films and dialoguing about the process, however, brought to my attention that the people had been clumped together as if acting as one, which erased or obscured many of the diverse behaviours that were present during the quality assurance process.

To map the tributary river I took on multiple lenses to trace the shifts that occurred in individual and group perspectives at Kulai. As a map the river identified where regional, national and international flows, forces and interests impacted to dislocate, relocate or transform relationships and practices within the preschool. The map of the tributary river occupied what Grossberg (1996: 173) described as "the middle ground [that is the space between] " a model of the

entirely local ...[and] the model of a totalised globality". This understanding suggests to me that the centre of meaning-making is situated in Grossberg's middle ground. The action of stretching in one direction and then another, built up tension within this space, which facilitated change (Hartley 2002).

The river maps showed me how the Kulai staff responded to involvement in the quality assurance process by utilizing QIAS as a tool to achieve locally formulated goals and mounting resistance to the forces of homogenisation from this national instrument (Appadurai 1990 cited in Grossberg 1996: 175). The fifty-two principles in QIAS were formulated from benchmarks based on the dominant Anglo-Australian culture, but had also been influenced in their development by "Euro-American expectations" (Jipson 2001: 4). Across Australia early childhood services who engage with QIAS are required to embrace, or simulate for the review period, these ideals to receive a certificate of accreditation as a quality service.

The river illuminated the conflict and dissonance created at Kulai by the movement of old (local or Aboriginal) ways towards a meeting or collision with new (national or dominant) practices. I was aware that the problems were perhaps exacerbated by the value differences that existed between the cultures. The practices of the dominant Anglo-Australian culture supplanted the local Aboriginal ways for the duration of the QIAS review period. This suggests to me that the alternate, home culture values and associated practices could potentially be reviewed by Ango-Australian early childhood peers, to be of a lesser or unsatisfactory quality from the reviewers' perspective.

At the starting point of the river maps, each tributary was identified as a member of the research team. Like Appaduria's model (1990 cited in Grossberg 1996), it followed a non-linear course where the speed, scale and volume of flow varied between members of the group. The maps of the river assumed a beginning mid-stream with an incomplete picture of what had gone before, and of the historical records that had been laid down, as Kulai preschool was fully operational for almost 40 years prior to the research. Within the picture "a geography of belonging and identification" (Grossberg 1996: 175) is traced, which was situated in place, yet moving through and beyond space to potentially confluent events, depicted here as whirlpools.

At junctures of confluence I observed, yet was simultaneously a part of the team of people making decisions or choices to engage or avoid participation. Those of us who engaged in mutual meaning-making experienced changes to practice of some kind, ranging from limited changes to longer-term transformations. I sensed the avoiders at times were unaware of the events. However, others were consciously resistant. When major conflicts or disjunctures occurred, such as illustrated by the waterfall scene, the movement through the confluence was energised by the discord. People emerged from these confluences differently and in unpredictable positions. A range of options were taken up, such as spinning off into spaces beyond the preschool, whilst others continued engaging within the space-in-between at a deeper more constructive level. Some people came to rest on the margins, with one foot seemingly in and another out of the organisation, moving between positions of engaging and disengaging.

Looking at the river maps I was able to see the process of meaning-making in action. The journeylines showed the influence of the environment as a whole on the people and their active role in being a part of the change. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000: 579) described these actions as "coparticipants attempt[ing] to remake and improve their own practices to overcome distortions, incoherences, contradictions and injustices". Coparticipants in the Kulai study gained clarity from metaphors, whilst largely ignoring distortions that were created. They saw a clear picture amidst images that were potentially incoherent, had new meanings revealed that could have been interpreted as contradictory, and perceived equitable positions whilst remaining conscious of continuing injustices in parts of Australian society towards diverse cultures.

In the process of tracing the journeylines of individual participants, the action of mapping enabled me to record their movements in the early childhood landscape. It also allowed me to analyse individual and group participation in workplace learning activities. From this analysis a new methodology emerged to identify how people participate in meaning-making in organizations (Whyte et al 2001).

On a theoretical level, maps as metaphors facilitated a unique angle of analysis not previously constructed in early childhood education research. A locally generated view of the complexities of meaning-making and participation in organisational

change emerged from this theoretical and practical analysis. The long term flow on from this experience at Kulai, has been to hybridize quality assurance through the development of a locally framed performance appraisal system. To achieve this Kulai borrowed fragments from QIAS and other schema known to the staff and interspersed these with culturally appropriate values to form the preschool's current system of self-evaluation and improvement.

Kulai has continued to build on what they brought to, and learned during the research project. They are engaged in ongoing meaning making, acting as a contemporary local early childhood service. Kulai has been able to enact resistance by erasing the culturally inappropriate parts of QIAS and utilising the useful elements to make the local orientation more apparent. This demonstrates the strengths a local community can gain by what Featherstone (1996: 64) calls the "indigenized and syncretized" use of global products to meet their own ends and retain a unique identity. Featherstone (1996: 64) notes:

> It is, of course, important that we examine the evidence from systematic studies which focus upon particular localities to examine the effects of these flows on particular groups of people.

This call to systematically examine such issues seems to highlight the importance of research such as the Kulai study, to look closely at the impact of global instruments, such as QIAS, on the local communities of people who link into preschools. Further examination of the social, cultural and economic impact of QIAS in a range of early childhood services and their associated communities is indicated.

Further lines of enquiry

In this thesis the impact of food sharing on relationship and trust building as a part of the meaning-making process has only been touched on. To date food as a metaphor for engagement has largely been overlooked in the literature.

How silence and voice are used, abused, received and ignored is another major area of the meaning-making process waiting to be explored. This has particular relevance to research projects and practice with a cross-cultural base.

Currently in Australia most early childhood services, as a quasi-government requirement, are regularly involved in review via the QIAS process. Further exploration of hybridisation of the quality assurance process to fit the particular needs of the local community could be fruitful.

I believe further research may reveal significant potential in the application of enactivist theory to early childhood teacher education practice in the workplace, in pre-service training and post graduate research. Such a position requires more detailed analysis to substantiate and extend the findings of this study, as much of the meaning-making at Kulai took place during informal dialogue, with more limited outcomes from formal group creativity sessions.

Maps as metaphors and as qualitative tools of analysis requires more detailed exploration across a range of organizational environments. Such research should focus on participation in meaning-making activities in large and small organisations, particularly where quality assurance systems are used. A comparison of outcomes from mapping the narratives of participant action researchers and participant observers could add a further level of complexity to understandings of the process.

Conclusion

Each of us connected with the research in particular ways. Our identities, roles and responsibilities altered in the process of engaging with change. This process presented opportunities for cultural and organisational border crossing for all of us. As forces of creativity, conflicts and resistance were generated by the changes, they were reflected on, negotiated and recorded as energies for engagement in learning.

This research was a learning journey for me. Observing what was known, paying respect and making regular blunders became integral to my way of operating across cultural borders and in an unfamiliar work environment. The act of sharing food enabled trust and relationships to begin to build, and provided a solid basis for the partnerships involved in this participatory action research.

I had come to this research thinking that knowledge was situated within the individual mind. I leave it with a very different view that maybe summed up in a phrase used by Ladson-Billings (2000: 257) "I am because we are," which asserts that individual existence and knowledge is contingent upon relationships with others. The term *ba* has been used by von Krogh et al (2000: 178) to describe the place where they understand knowledge to be created. They described *ba* as

> a social context for advancing individual and/or collective knowledge creation. Indeed, the power to create knowledge is embedded not just in one person but in the interaction of that person with others and the environment. Therefore, a particular individual's knowledge can be shared, re-created and amplified when he or she is part of that context.

The concept of *ba* describes the way I perceived our team at Kulai came to operate. This movement in our understanding was in part, a consequence of operating substantially outside our comfort zones. Amongst the most challenging aspect for me was being embedded, during the research, in a context outside my own culture, with a limited awareness of communication protocols. Also none of us at Kulai had experienced QIAS first hand, and this caused considerable initial professional unease.

The core focus of my thesis was that quality assurance can be used to generate a process of meaning-making, dependent on (inter)action, with meaning emerging from the space-in-between. Local meanings and analysis of how knowledge is made, can be conceptualised as fluid and complex processes, negotiated here with the aid of metaphors. The outcome of this thesis has been a theoretical analysis of meaning-making amongst early childhood educators, with reflections on how it emerged locally.

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