Beyond the Filing Cabinet:
Making Room for Research

By Alma Fleet

After having finally gained a period of study leave, I have been sorting through the piles of papers which keep building up around me and trying to put them into manageable order. One drawer of the filing cabinet now refuses to close. It is loosely labeled "Research." It is overflowing with data files, audiotapes, and bulging green hanging files allotted to different ongoing projects. The first of the dividers is labeled "Publications." As I stand with my hands full of yet more files which need to go into this fulsome drawer and look vaguely around for some way of solving this burgeoning problem, I realize that my predicament is a metaphor for my professional development.

I have worked as an early childhood teacher educator in the tertiary sector in Australia for over twenty years. During that time, the nature of my work, the environment in which I spend most of my time, and the characteristics of the professional field to which early childhood educators belong has changed radically. Perhaps a few stories will illustrate some elements of these changes and generate some themes or imagery to help those of us working in tertiary education conceptualize or indeed reconceptualize our professional selves. I will ask the reader's patience in seeing where the narrative is headed. The thumbnail sketches may seem to unfold in rather an accidental manner with little linear logic. Serendip-

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ity is a key element, although there is little that is light-hearted about some of the reflections. The story, as with any exploration of a personal professional journey, contains its own validity (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997; Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997).

The Beginning

Becoming a tertiary teacher educator in Australia in the 1970s often meant working in the college sector. While a few early childhood (teaching children from birth through eight in a range of settings) course options were available in universities, the specialist work of preparing teachers for preschools, long day centers, and the first years of school was undertaken in colleges. I had a teaching qualification and a strong academic record including a Master's degree (University of California) with a specialization in "primary language arts." When a position came up in a city teachers' college for a reading specialist, I thought it worth applying. At the time I was working as an adviser for a large community based organization which co-ordinated services (mostly sessional and full-day pre-schools) for children from three to five years old. Previous to a brief stint as a pepper-corn sorter at a major spice bottling plant (yes, there's a story in that, too), I had been teaching children aged four, five, and six in Scotland. The closest I had come to adult education had been an approach by my supervisor in California, asking me to share my skills across the school district by leaving the classroom to be a Reading Resource teacher. That opportunity was not pursued as I left shortly thereafter to go overseas.

Armed with this background and having been in Australia for two months, I applied for a range of positions. When invited to an interview for a lecturing position, I presented myself at the Nursery School Teachers College. I can see myself in the Principal's office with several worthy souls smiling encouragingly at me. The only mention of research or publications was a polite enquiry regarding my Master's degree thesis (which related to sixth graders' choice of reading materials and was totally irrelevant to the task at hand) and to my one published refereed article in *The Reading Teacher* (Fleet, Hurst, & McKay, 1976). The co-authored article had been encouraged by my "boss" in Scotland (the "infants deputy") and described a novel form of year one classroom organization to promote literacy development. While writing had always been important to me, publishing had not been part of my professional role.

Despite the fact that I had no image of myself as an academic, shortly thereafter I found myself reporting for duty in the academy. An important element in my appointment was the dearth, in Australia, of people working in the early childhood area who had any qualifications beyond three year teaching diplomas. Structures did not exist then for translating those diplomas to bachelor degree status. A discipline which was establishing itself in the tertiary sector valued higher degrees and my Master's degree was germane enough to be attractive.

In the next few years, the basic College job remained the same: community liaison and responsiveness to the field and the preparation of excellent early childhood teachers. As part of course planning, we read and discussed research and generated good ideas, but time was spent mostly in other ways. In the early 1980s, when a stray burst of energy, a publisher, and an enthusiastic colleague caught me off guard, the result was a two-part textbook related to classroom organization (Fleet & Martin, 1984). We had not found anything which reflected what we wanted to say with particular reference to primary education and my colleague was between jobs when the idea first surfaced, so writing a textbook seemed like a good idea. Such writing was seen as additional to our core activities, so the book was written over weekends and during the Easter "break."

This publishing effort gave me a chance to use the literature in a way which focused on practical application that could make a difference to student and practicing teachers. The intent to improve the experience for children and teachers was paramount. An increasing number of conference presentations developed in a similar vein—generally describing and promoting teaching strategies and aspects of literacy learning. A few of these presentations were developed as journal articles, but publishing was not required from staff working in the college sector.

Research Gains a Presence

The vagaries of deployment resulted in my being assigned an increased role in various aspects of fieldwork, organizing and supervising aspects of the practicum. Publications emerging from this work included a paper on the professional development aspects for practicing teachers of working with student teachers in their classrooms (Fleet, 1981). With reference to the literature on adult learning, the paper was analytical and professional, perhaps considering what has come to be called the praxis of teacher education. Continuing involvement with practice teaching began to throw up many questions which begged to be investigated, like—how did the relationship between student teachers and their cooperating teachers impact on the success of the "student teaching" experience? It seemed to me that, often, the relationship between these two adults affected the teaching practice outcomes more than did the student teacher's basic ability to teach and work effectively with children and adults.

Remembering that Doctorates were not the norm in the College sector, the encouragement of colleagues and the need for a diversion from a divorce encouraged me to pursue doctoral studies. I had a question which was basically about relationships, a qualitative matter. I wanted to find out what was happening inside the student teacher/co-operating teacher relationship. My own naiveté led me to pay inadequate attention to supervisor selection and to put too much faith in the power and responsibility of others to guide the research. This perspective is explored elsewhere (Fleet, Holland, & Leigh, 1998). I knew I wished to pursue a study within

the framework of grounded theory but I was unable to find a supervisor, particularly one with expertise in either the practicum or the early childhood field, who could assist me. I was a fully employed professional lecturer who had previously been very successful academically; I trusted in my willingness to work, my acknowledged perceptiveness, and my perseverance to see it through. If I had not been passionately interested in the area of investigation, those qualities, strong as they were, would not have been enough to complete the study.

This thesis defined my life in terms of the research agenda for almost fourteen years. Two tertiary amalgamations, two husbands, two houses, the birth of two children, and two medical complications (back and shoulder) brought pause to the academic sweep towards knowledge and scholarship. Some of the slowed pace was a consequence of being female; some was due to the constantly shifting nature of the field itself. Early childhood teacher education and I were in an environment which was slippery and strained at the edges, but characterized by dogged determination to survive.

The doctoral study was underway but glimpses from a thesis journal, which I kept for one year in the latter part of the endeavor, show that the process was far from straightforward. Still, publication was not a priority.

> May 5:
> *Bad things. Being left at home on a beautiful sunny Sunday when Dad goes with curious little girl in backpack and eager little boy by the hand for an outing. Giving Mum free time to study. I don't want it. I want to be with my family.*
>
> June 12:
> *It's so depressing, overwhelming and continuous, and the only solution is probably to keep going, like that horrible last few minutes of childbirth where you know it's going to get worse and the only way to get it over is to relax the body, concentrate on the task at hand and let the pain come. There is no going back. The pain's not as strong, but longer lasting and more debilitating.*
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> June 30:
> *At this late stage (no, I didn't get it in on the last, really last deadline), the whole thesis is still unfolding. This is exciting in terms of motivation to keep going, and rewarding in terms of having the grounded theory process "work" in the way it is supposed to.*
>
> *Ways of presenting the last few chapters are only emerging while it is being written....*

Although a completed thesis now exists (Fleet, 1993), it is a rather unwieldy document which reflects a range of compromises between my areas of strength, my supervisor's areas of expertise, and the evolving nature of research in the field. To make my work acceptable to those with a range of perspectives across the academy, I used a variety of methodologies to investigate the research questions. I felt that the results would be important, and I did not want them dismissed by researchers at

either end of a paradigm controversy because they had been gained in a way which was not seen as relevant by one group or valid by the other. One examiner noted and commented on this aspect of the work:

> Any current thesis in education needs to locate itself in terms of the shifts in the field from experimental and survey methods to ethnography and case study and action research and critical theory. What is unusual about this thesis is that, rather than mapping the field and opting for one conception of it, the author tries to collect up the pieces and to reintegrate them.

It was interesting that the examiners commented on the state of the research field as the context for the study. My journey into researching and publishing may have been a reflection of the changing nature of the field itself.

> Having identified what looks to be a gap in the literature on supervision, the candidate finds herself caught in the consequences of [a] "paradigm shift". That this is characteristic of the field and not just self-inflicted can be ascertained from looking at the major journals during the same period. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, the journal probably most directly concerned with issues of this kind, has in the last few years moved quite dramatically from measurement studies of the kind included in the first part of this thesis to a current concern with different kinds of research on teaching characterized by "case studies."

In fact, the case studies, which were part of the study, were commended as being "an intriguing and well-written account" by one examiner and "among the most interesting and informative components of the study" by another.

So, the process was survived, the gateway to the title of scholarly excellence was now behind me; my ideas could be seen to have more status because of the tortuous path of "research training" which I had endured. Family and friends certainly saw it as an occasion for a most amazing celebration. The children, who were by this time quite socially adept, welcomed guests, and had them sign the frontispiece of the thesis as the guest register. It was a shared community process and a celebratory event.

Who knows if the process achieved what the host university would have expected? One of my colleagues used her thesis as a doorstop and rarely opened it again. Another said that she hated the whole thing so much by the end that she couldn't bear to bring herself to publish anything from it. So, I did not feel out of step when my feelings were more of bitterness than satisfaction. I certainly turned my attention to other areas of research. And research I did; although that move was probably due more to the political realities of tertiary restructuring than to any motivation inspired by doctoral study. Like childbirth, though, the value of that study gets better from a distance.

Transition from College to University

In a move towards strengthening the professional nature of the early childhood

field and gaining the status recognition of a four year degree, early childhood teacher education programs began a period of restructuring (Lewis, Schiller, & Duffie, 1992). At about the same time, smaller colleges began amalgamating into larger units and those units became absorbed into universities. Academic staff from both sets of institutions saw many potential benefits to these arrangements, but there was also much unease.

University academics felt perhaps that their hard-earned promotions would be compromised and research dollars stretched by accepting college personnel into their midst. As the colleges had not had a research or publication priority, they were seen as less scholarly, as not fostering true academics. We were seen as vocational with a small "v." At the same time, as members of the college sector, we were anxious about losing integrity in the eyes of "the field" by turning attention to matters seen traditionally as belonging more to the ivory tower. Time pressures were certainly evident as people with heavy commitments to community-based projects and committees found themselves needing research publications for promotion and peer recognition in their new environments. The new employer was now valuing publication more than community responsiveness. Ethical dilemmas arose as decisions were made.

During this time, another publisher's initiative teased me into a book effort. A friend and colleague was invited to write a book for the early childhood field, and asked me to join her. It was tantalizing to have something else to work on which was in a more personally sustaining genre than the thesis. As "the literature" was increasingly recognizing the contribution made by teachers' voices to our understanding of the nature of teachers' work, my co-author and I decided to explore the topic of *What's in a Day? Working in Early Childhood* by asking staff in several locations to keep work diaries which recorded thoughts and events for three working days, a form of critical incidents diary (Fleet & Clyde, 1993). These diaries were then analyzed for themes and snippets were used (anonymously) to illustrate points in chapters devoted to each of the major areas which evolved. The perspective taken was more "pragmatic" than "critical." Beginning teachers were often overwhelmed with the complexities of the jobs they faced in the early childhood field. The intention of this research-based teaching text was to help novice teachers gain a more realistic and richer view of work in the field than they may have had before.

The writing process wrapped itself around our contorted lifestyles. As we each lived in different Australian States and neither yet had electronic communication, faxes, telephones, ordinary mail and occasional joint writing sessions had to suffice. It was composition by laptop computer. While we each took responsibility for major chapters, we wrote together in half days before and after conferences which we were both attending, and became familiar with office lounges in major city airports. We argued over audience and terminology. The word "teacher" meant different things in each of the nation's States in different early childhood services, and we disagreed on what we meant by "curriculum." Preparation courses ranged from technical

courses to colleges of advanced education to universities, with sites in transition across each interface. We included participants with a range of qualifications and wanted to be relevant across the birth to eight years age range for people studying in each of the possible tertiary courses. Being good friends was useful; being passionate about the field was essential.

The publisher was kindly about deadlines and trustful that we knew the field for which we were writing. Later endorsement in textbook selection across the country rewarded his belief. Being believed in was a welcome respite from the "prove yourself" gauntlet of thesis writing. It was relaxing to work with the teachers' voices and familiar teaching themes to develop a text useful for novices.

The Balance Shifts

It was a Federal agenda to amalgamate smaller colleges and the universities in a variety of configurations. After complicated negotiations, our institution chose to amalgamate with a university which seemed to value our areas of expertise.

We started life in the university in a string of borrowed premises, teaching in a theological college, using office space in the library, and grouping ourselves in some temporarily vacant rooms in an older building. The space was made available out of the good will of others on the campus and was much appreciated, but it was minimalist accommodation. We had to reshape ourselves in terms of psyche and programs: rewriting courses, changing timetables, and losing the identity of such things as a student common room. Our bonded group had to engage with the wider academic world, with its benefits and challenges, its student union and technologically advanced library. The chatty college newsletter was replaced with the *University Research Report.*

We were all still committed to excellence in teaching, and indeed the university included teaching excellence on its promotion criteria. There seemed to be less time available, however, for speaking with parent groups ("What to do with your biting toddler," "Preparing your child for school," "Sustaining the confident reader") and advocacy in children's services committees. The grateful bunch of flowers from local groups began to be replaced by financial payment as the "user pays" philosophy of government crept into the tertiary sector. Each new round of reports seemed to include a shift in funding criteria: conference attendance could only gain funding with paper presentations, refereed journals earned more credit than conference papers, scholarly works gained more credit than textbooks, grants from outside organizations earned more credit than grants from inside sources. More people lurched their way through higher degrees while teaching full time and struggling to maintain personal lives. Newer academics came with higher degrees straight from other universities rather than from the field. The goal posts had shifted.

Within the university community, we began the task of presenting, justifying, and validating ourselves in a range of committees. We were advocates for the

Institute of Early Childhood within the larger university. We set out to overcome snide remarks (in the genre of "paid for playing with little kids") and worked hard to establish our research and publications within the university community. We began attending grant-writing workshops and sifting our way through ethics forms. Neither had been part of our previous work environment.

Having been successful on a small internal grant application, I was one of a group of staff invited along to an open house run by the University's Research Office. Chats with other staff tended to come around to "Why are YOU here?" as the selection criteria for free wine and cheese was not apparent. In the course of "circulating," however, a useful moment arrived. I found myself talking to a senior female academic who was active on "outside" grant selection committees. In a reasonably polite way I ranted about the difficulties of having qualitative research accepted by what I perceived to be the male-dominated quantitative-oriented research (internal grant awarding) committee. She listened to my ravings and dealt with them pragmatically, noting that what was important was establishing a "track record." I noted that it was hard to be established in that way when you could not get the money for research assistance. I reported that a colleague and I had recently been refused a small grant for the study of graduate women on the grounds that the study did not include the experiences of men.

While my perception may have been jaundiced, she was attentive. Being from another discipline, she asked if anyone was interested in and writing about the areas I was wanting to research. While slightly bemused by the question, I said that they were. She said that what was needed was to find the refereed journals which would publish the type of work I did. That would establish the track record which was sought by funding agencies. She said, "You have to get the runs on the board." Finishing my wine, I walked meditatively back to my office in a grand new purpose-built building and wrote the advice on my white board. It stayed there to grab my attention for the better part of two years while I began to think in a more strategic way.

During this time, the whole Institute was pursuing similar discussions. We had guests come from other Schools of the University to talk to us about the ways through the maze of university culture. We did not wish to be patronized or belittled as we felt we were strong in what we did, capable high achievers. We were not, however, familiar with the structures and unwritten rules of university life. We were advised, for example, to get one of our staff members onto the University Research Committee to help untangle its mysteries as well as to reshape its culture. One of the speakers at this workshop was another senior female academic. I found her style encouraging and intelligent. When an opportunity came up to gain a place in a Women's Management Mentor Scheme, I took advantage of the chance to ask her to support me in my work on a nominated project. I was working to establish a partnership with the Department of School Education to support and extend appropriate early childhood philosophies and practices in the first years of school. While it was an area unfamiliar to her, she was generous in her time and met with

me over coffee for the next six months. Preparing for meetings with her helped focus my thinking. I found that I had to rearrange my filing cabinet to accommodate the new areas I was investigating.

And, at regular intervals, around came *The Research Report*. Filling in details of publications and grants can be a very sobering enterprise. Increasingly, however, there was something substantive to contribute to the School's efforts to gain funding from Federal agencies which paid more attention to refereed journal publications than to teaching expertise. Despite the changing climate, I also held on tenaciously to my belief in our responsibility to assist the growth of new teachers, to show a commitment to good teaching at the tertiary level, with all the time that that entails. Despite the lack of funding payback for textbooks, especially co-authored pragmatic ones, I joined two colleagues and published another book, this time a collection of stories about the nature of teachers' work, a collection of critical incidents from preschool and long day care teachers which we originally workshopped through a short writing course. The short stories were framed as discussion starters, with reflective responses from the original authors and others in the field (Patterson, Fleet, & Duffie, 1995). As with the intention of the original books, they were framed to help novices extend their skills as reflective practitioners, thinking through ethical dilemmas and complex work-based situations in which others had found themselves in order to develop their own understanding of professional problem-solving.

Networking with colleagues in the field has also remained on the priority list. It is possible to fit in a little work in schools alongside teachers, but not much. The exigencies of the current funding systems mean that field-based consultancies are more attractive than voluntary relationships. The relative ease of travel and international communication has also made world-wide links easier and the sharing of knowledge internationally more compelling.

With these shifts over time, there has been a need to use time and space as effectively as possible. Those of us who have come into the universities from the colleges (and decided to stay) have also learned new scripts. There have been some losses (such as extended fieldwork placements), but they are often intertwined with other changes (such as cuts in federal funding), so that little is directly the result of the structural change. There certainly have been benefits in moving from a parochial climate to a larger, more technologically advanced environment. The autonomy of the Institute is currently under threat, although the cynics amongst us see a restructuring as an inevitable reflection of world forces.

Some of us have been able to adapt to the research culture while maintaining the commitment to teaching and the community at large. Indeed, I recently won a promotion on just those grounds. I still gain my greatest satisfaction from student compliments and evidence of student teacher commitment and achievement. Nevertheless, I have learned to select conferences not only on the basis of interest in the topic and professional networking, but also in terms of areas where presentations can lead to publication in reputable journals.

Along with many of my colleagues, I have been able to establish a professional presence across the university community. Most of my work companions have also managed to create a professional image in their offices, with tidy bookshelves and organized paperwork. On the other hand, while I have learned to maintain several projects simultaneously, with each in the process of analysis and synthesis, I have not figured out how to deal with the quantity of material generated by each of my myriad activities. Heaps of files and potentially interesting papers are stacked about my office, along with inviting new books waiting to be investigated and photos of my children on the window ledge. One corner of the office is kept clear to accommodate a sick child if one has to come to work with me, laden with pillows and comfy accessories.

While taking on board each of the new personae that the amalgamations and restructurings of the last twenty years have offered me, I still have the challenge of managing the accompanying paperwork. I must, therefore, leave this refreshing opportunity for professional reverie, order the tasks yet to be done during this day, and turn—briefly—to another effort at reorganizing the filing cabinet. Something obviously has to come out to make room for all that is waiting to go in. Therein lies the dilemma.

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