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*In memory of Richard Jones
1967–2015*

Editors

Special Issue: *Stopping for a moment: The influence of change on teachers' professional practice*

Jenny Ferrier-Kerr and Kerry Earl

With afterword by Susan Groundwater-Smith

Editorial Board

Marilyn Blakeney-Williams, Nigel Calder, Bronwen Cowie, Kerry Earl, Pip Hunter, Clive McGee, Dawn Penney, Kirsten Petrie, Merilyn Taylor, and Bill Ussher.

Correspondence and articles for review should be sent electronically to Teachers and Curriculum Administrator, Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, Faculty of Education. Email: wmier@waikato.ac.nz

Contact details

Teachers and Curriculum Administrator
Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research
Faculty of Education
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240
New Zealand

Phone +64 7 858 5171

Fax +64 7 838 4712

Email: wmier@waikato.ac.nz

Website: <http://tandc.ac.nz>

About the Journal

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Teachers and Curriculum welcomes

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- research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
- thinkpieces with a maximum of 1500 words; and
- book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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Teachers and Curriculum provides an avenue for the publication of papers that

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- provides examples of innovative curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practice; and
- review books and other resources that have a curriculum, pedagogy and assessment focus.

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Acknowledgement of Reviewers

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'MOORE STRONG': A STORY OF HOPE AND RECOVERY

DONNA GOODMAN

*Briarwood Elementary School in Moore,
Oklahoma*

Donna is a mathematics and technology educator at Briarwood Elementary School in Moore, Oklahoma. She travelled to New Zealand in 2012 as member of a study tour group from the University of Central Oklahoma's Educational Leadership programme. She has since graduated with a Masters of Education in Administration. In 2014, Donna returned to New Zealand on a different kind of professional learning journey and also courageously agreed to share with others for the first time about the experiences she describes in her article.

Professional Summary

In reflecting on the influence of change on her professional practice this author shares how a natural disaster became a catalyst for change personally and professionally. The reader is invited to experience this change through Donna's writing and understand the ways in which an unexpected event lead to new actions that resulted in significant and positive change.

This is a story of hope and recovery, and change. It is a story about the town I call home and the incredible school district in which I work. It is a personal story of the events of May 20, 2013 and how a school, a district, and a community recovered in just fifteen months living up to the motto 'Moore Strong'.

Moore is located in central Oklahoma and is part of the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. It covers an area of 57.6 square kilometres and has a population of more than 55,000, making it the seventh largest city in the state of Oklahoma and one of the fastest growing. The wonderful thing about Moore is that despite its growing size it maintains a small town feel. Located just south of Oklahoma City and north of Norman, Moore is in the heart of what is known as 'Tornado Alley'. With the Oklahoma City metropolitan area one of the most tornado-prone major cities in the world, there have been about 20 tornadoes in the immediate vicinity of Moore between 1890 and 2013. The most significant ones however, are simply known to everyone as *May 3, 1999*; *May 8, 2003*; *May 10, 2010*; and now *May 20, 2013*. Ask any Moore resident where they were on those days and they probably have a story tell.

In the fourteen years that I have lived in South West Oklahoma City, I have had the opportunity to watch Moore blossom. When I first moved to Oklahoma, in the four kilometre drive from my house to the interstate there was a neighbourhood comprising Briarwood Elementary (my school), a Wal-Mart and a lot of fields. During those years the fields have been developed to include shopping, dining and entertainment. Moore even has its own state of the art hospital, the Moore Medical Center. Everything I needed could easily be found within 6.5 square kilometres.

The city's major public employer, Moore Public Schools, employs 2500 people. The district has been providing a high quality of education for more than 100 years. It serves over 23,000 students in the Moore and South Oklahoma City area from Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade making it the third largest district in the state. There are 32 schools (23 Elementary, 5 Junior Highs—7th and 8th grade, 3 High Schools—9th to 12th grade, and 1 Junior/Senior High School) within 160 square kilometres.

As the city was being recognized nationally for its economic growth and the 19th Street corridor (the earlier mentioned fields) was developing rapidly and drawing new businesses to the area, Moore Public Schools' district was growing. Thousands of new homes were and are in the planning stages within the district's boundaries over the next few years, hence in February of 2013 the patrons of Moore Public Schools were asked to vote on a \$126,460,000 bond issue.

The bond had two propositions. The first was for construction, renovation, repair, and replacement projects. This phase would provide for two new elementary schools scheduled to open in the fall of 2014 and a new junior high to be completed in the fall of 2015. It also provided for pre-school additions, improved athletic facilities at all three high schools, and a new band room for Southmoore High. The bond also allowed for the construction of new language/math labs at all of the secondary

schools. Importantly it was to give the district the ability to acquire land for siting future schools, and acquire technology and related security equipment for all the sites. The second proposition was transportation. It would provide for the purchase of transportation related equipment including camera surveillance systems for safety and student activity buses.

The community passed the bond issue with a 74% margin of approval. Several months later Moore's beloved superintendent, Susan Pierce, announced her retirement to coincide with the end of the school year. Her successor was the equally admired Dr. Robert Romines, who was a product of the Moore school district. It was an exciting time to be a part of Moore Public Schools and the future was looking bright.

Then came May 20th...

That Monday started like any other day. My daughter Sarah and I wished each other 'a day' (we had decided long ago that 'have a good/great day' created too much pressure). We were both anticipating the last four days of the school year and her upcoming graduation on Saturday.

Grizzly Growl (school assembly) was scheduled for that morning. It was to be the final one for the year so the entire student body showed up for the celebration. Students from PreKindergarten-Grade 6 were recognized for their accomplishments in music, art, and physical education. There was also a very special celebration for reading. Students had accumulated enough points throughout the year that both the principal and the assistant principal had to kiss a goat. People from the neighbouring Orr Family Farm brought the animal into the gym to the delight of all the students.

I met my students back in the classroom after Grizzly Growl. With attendance taken, we began our normal routine. My students had math, rotated to science, and the next stop was MAPs (Measures of Academic Progress) followed by lunch. After lunch the students completed their rotations with reading and finally social studies. It was just a typical day in fourth grade (9–10 year olds) at Briarwood Elementary School.

In hindsight, the day was anything but typical. We had experienced storms the night before and tornadoes had touched down in nearby Shawnee. Not being from Oklahoma I didn't know how to read the signs but everyone else had a very unsettled feeling. The sky was different, the air was different. As the day went on and news stations reported severe weather watches and warnings, more and more students were being checked out (taken out of school) by their parents.

At 2:15pm I took a group of students to the Media Center for a presentation by the Southwest Oklahoma City Library branch of the Pioneer Library System. The librarian was there to promote the library's summer reading program and get them excited about all the fun activities in store for them. It was during her presentation that more students were being checked out. Some parents weren't waiting in the office; they were coming in and taking their children out. We realised we were in for a bad storm.

We returned to the class at what would have been recess time. The weather looked too bad to be outside, so students remained in their classrooms. I had duty that day so I walked around the pod for twenty minutes supervising the students. My teammates stayed close by that day. Angela was concerned about her children who attended different schools within the district. Sheryl was worried about her son who was at Westmoore High. My thoughts turned to Sarah who was at Southmoore High less than a kilometre from my location. Theresa was receiving weather updates and keeping us informed. She said that they were reporting another May 3rd-type storm. We knew by then that it was going to be really bad.

Just after 3pm the principal calmly announced that we should keep our students in the classrooms. I put on a CD for them to listen to. By this point I only had thirteen students in my class. Angela and I met in the bathroom area between our two classrooms. We discussed what the safest place to shelter was going to be because unless it turned we were in the direct path of the storm. Between the two of us we had too many students for the tiny bathroom area, so we decided the wall behind our desks would be our best bet. Several minutes later, the principal announced on the intercom that we were to lock down. No one should leave the buildings and we were to pull anyone outside in.

It started to rain ... hard and the hail was pounding on the roof. It was loud and it was getting darker outside the window. The principal came back on the intercom and told us to take our tornado

precautions. I instructed my students to move to the interior walls of the classroom. Several of the students began to cry and one boy sobbed he didn't want to die. I held him and told them all that no one was going to die that I would keep them safe. One boy asked if we could pray and so we all held hands as he led us: 'Dear Jesus, please make the rain and hail stop. Amen'. It was at that point the power went out and the room became pitch black. The children were scared and so was I. We couldn't see anything but we could hear it coming. The closest sound that describes a tornado is the roaring sound made by a train. But I'm not sure that does it justice. I later learned that the sound of a tornado is not the wind but the debris ball that continues to chew up everything in its path.

I told the students to get down and cover their heads. The crying got louder and I tried to reach out and cover as many of them as I could. Just as it hit I shouted to them, 'hold on, I've got you and I'm not letting go'. I remember saying it over and over to let them know we were going to be okay.

It was suddenly very cold and I could feel the wind which didn't make any sense to me as I was inside a building. I lifted my head and peeked over my shoulder. In a split second I saw daylight and realized the roof was being violently ripped from the building. I closed my eyes tight, pressed down hard on the children I could reach and kept chanting, 'I've got you!' as the rain, mud, and debris came down on top of us. My ears popped. Somewhere I had heard that happens when you are in the eye of the storm. That was when I knew it was almost over. We just had to wait a little longer for the backside of the storm to pass over. I'm not sure how long I stayed curled up under the debris. Then I realised I could hear crying and sirens, and Angela calling my name.

As I stood up I could see we had all made it but not without some injuries. One girl lost her hearing aid and another her glasses. One needed a bathroom while another was desperately trying to climb out by any means possible. I had to hold on to him to keep him from pulling beams and wires down on top of us. Another little girl had a cut on her head as did one of the boys who was mainly concerned with a tire he saw on what was left of the roof. I told him that it was a truck as I motioned him to climb towards me. The most serious injury among my precious students was to a little girl. A large piece of her thigh looked as if it had been scooped out of her leg and was just hanging. She was bleeding badly and I knew I needed help. I yelled to Angela and she came back with a dad who helped me get the children up and over my desk and through a hole of beams, wall and classroom furnishings. We joined the line of two other classes attempting to exit the wreckage. Our only option for getting out was climbing on a desk, crawling through a broken window, and being set down on the other side. The door had been blocked by a car.

By the time I got out my students had scattered. As I searched for them, a woman ran up to me asking if I was hurt while dragging me away from the building. I told her I needed to find my students but she said we had to keep moving because of the gas leaks and fears of an explosion. I made it to the playground only to find a rutted field with little grass, swampy mud and downed power lines. Children were wandering around, lost and crying. Several of us rounded them up and headed toward the main street. Once we reached the road I turned to look back and saw that the entire neighbourhood had been levelled.

I wondered for a long time how everyone reached us so quickly. In the days that followed reports said that first responders, neighbours and parents were literally driving behind the storm so that when it was gone they were able to hit the ground running. We were never alone.

As vehicles arrived, we loaded children into them and moved them as far back into the neighbourhood south of the school and away from the devastation as we could. All we could do now was tend to the minor injuries, comfort students and wait for parents to find their children.

Once the students were safe, my thoughts turned to Sarah. I didn't know if Southmoore High had made it, as it is only a half kilometre south of Briarwood. Cell phones weren't working as far as making calls. Text messages were sketchy at best. I had lost my reading glasses so a co-worker was trying to answer my text messages. Unfortunately none were from Sarah. As we followed the vehicles on foot into my neighbourhood, a neighbour found me and told me my house was gone. Worried that Sarah might have gone home to seek shelter, I walked down my street not knowing what to expect. When I reached the house, I found it heavily damaged but not levelled. Sarah wasn't there. A neighbour helped rescue my dogs and secured them at his home while I waited with my students. Finally, I got some good news. A colleague at the high school got a text message through to me that

read, 'I've got Sarah under my watchful care'. I was so relieved. I was able to care for my Briarwood students knowing that a fellow teacher was comforting my child. Around 4:30pm my neighbours walked to the high school to collect their daughters and Sarah. If their vehicles were drivable they were going to try and get them home. About three hours later, I was hugging my daughter.

We still couldn't get calls out but text messaging was getting better. My family in Texas was frantic for news. My brother finally reached me and was able to let my parents and my oldest daughter know that we had survived. Friends reached out to us and offered us a place to stay. Sarah and I threw a few necessities into a bag and joined the mass exodus out of Moore. A drive that normally would take 15 minutes stretched into a three-hour journey.

In the days immediately following the tornado we met as a district at the largest church available to us to grieve for our losses, give thanks for those who survived, and hear plans to move forward. On what would have been our last day of school, we celebrated with our students and their families. There were lots of hugs and tears, but it felt good to have closure with the students before a summer of uncertainty for so many. All three high schools celebrated the accomplishments of their seniors with graduation ceremonies. For my family, it was a bittersweet moment. What should have been a joyful occasion for my youngest daughter will always be marked by the events of May 20th.

On the weather front, the area continued to receive bouts of heavy rainfall that just exasperated the situation for the citizens of Moore. Then on Friday, May 31st, another outbreak of tornados struck the area—this time during the evening drive time. Nine people died and seventy-five were injured when three separate tornados touched down in the metro area. As damage assessments came in around the district, it became clear that every Moore Public School facility had sustained damage from the tornado outbreak that had spanned eleven days.

In June, the district and the community began to take the steps necessary to move forward. Donations and assistance poured in from all over the state, the country and from around the world. The clean up began on a large scale and then the rebuilding started. Having made the decision to keep the faculty and students of each of the affected elementary schools together, preparations were made to find facilities in which to house us. District officials were approached by Emmaus Baptist Church located just about 0.5 km from where Briarwood once stood and offered the use of their facilities. So, for the 2013–14 school year we were proudly known as the Briarwood/Emmaus Bears. Not only did they provide facilities, they actually built walls to create the additional classrooms we needed, turned a chapel into a gym, and participated in the construction of a playground which the district in turn donated to the Baptist Children's Home at the end of the year. In addition, to the physical support we received, the church officials and congregation provided emotional and spiritual support to a staff who were working hard to create normality for the students.

Once the schools were relocated, district officials turned their attention to making sure school could start in August. The biggest challenge was money. While the district had insurance, initial damage estimates were between \$60 and \$70 million. The two different storms meant two sets of deductibles and that along with a drop in state aid resulted in a tight budget. Despite the different types of insurance the district carried, there were still gaps. So, officials decided to appeal to the public, and the *Rising from the Storm Campaign* was born. All donations went into the general fund but were earmarked for tornado relief with donors able to specify which projects they wanted to fund. With the help of this campaign, classes across the district were able to begin on time.

The start of the 2013–14 school year brought many new challenges. Schools in the United States were still focused on preventing a repeat of the school shootings that had made headlines the previous year. We in Moore were no different. All administrators, faculty, and staff underwent Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate Training (A.L.I.C.E.). The district also set down new emergency procedures in the wake of the storms. Parents would be allowed to remove students from campus without penalty on days of severe weather, however once sirens sounded all buildings would go on lockdown until the threat passed.

At Briarwood, our main focus was to keep students and teachers calm with the upcoming storm season. We created a *Crisis Management Team* consisting of the principal, her secretary, the counsellor, and three administrative interns. We adopted a divide and conquer strategy. Working with grade level teachers and staff members we identified students and staff who might be struggling. As a team, we

made a point of seeking out identified students and touching base with them. Moore Youth and Family, which received a grant to place counsellors in our affected schools, were on hand to provide additional support. These counsellors responded with relaxation training and small group sessions as well as creating another adult presence on our campus.

On May 20th 2014, we marked the anniversary with a day of celebration. We began our day with an uplifting assembly and then we walked as a school family from the church to our new building where we remembered those lost with the release of balloons. We blew bubbles and hung seeded stars so that when the rains came flowers might bloom. Emmaus even provided a picnic lunch for students and staff. I am happy to report that we had a great year. Everyone rose to the challenge of holding classes in a very non-traditional setting while in the media spotlight. We had the opportunity to meet people from around the country and the world who just showered us with support, prayers, and love. We are looking forward to the move in August as we settle into our brand new building and begin creating new memories as we continue to move forward and heal.

On a personal note, the storm changed my life in many ways. In a matter of minutes everything I was familiar with was gone ... my house, its contents, my car, and the school along with ten years of professional work. In the days that followed, I realized that I had a choice: to wallow in self-pity and remain a victim or to take action and start putting my life back in order. Four days after the storm, I replaced my car and then began looking for a new home. One day short of a month, my daughter and I moved into a brand new dream home. Many lessons were learned along the way, but more importantly, I found an inner strength I didn't know I possessed. I chose to stay at Briarwood because I knew that was where I was meant to be. I accepted new responsibilities during our year at Emmaus becoming a part of the school's leadership team, crisis management team, and Campus Coach. I also accepted a spot on the district's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Leadership team. We moved into our brand new state-of-the-art safe school in August just fifteen months after the storm. Now that we are settled in, other opportunities to grow professionally have become available. I recently accepted the position of Site Tech in addition to my regular teaching responsibilities. The event of May 20, 2013 has given me the confidence to accept new challenges. I feel stronger having survived the experience.

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