A PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE ON MULTILITERAICES IN AN AUSTRALIAN SHOW COMMUNITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING AS RURAL ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The mobile community that owns and operates 'sideshow alley' in Australia's agricultural show circuits has traditionally been marginalised in terms of formal educational provision. However, the establishment of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children in 2000 reflected the aspirations of show people and sympathetic educators that education for mobile groups can be enacted differently. This different educational enactment is explored through the conceptual lens of a 'multiliteracies' framework (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), which is used to identify and value the complex and diverse forms of sense-making that the show people deploy. This paper focuses on the perspective of the Principal of the school, who was one of the interviewees in the research reported here and also the lead author of this paper. Analysis of these data indicates that formal learning that embraces and enhances multiliteracies is one significant strategy for promoting education productively – and potentially transformatively – in such communities.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores some of the dilemmas and strategies that the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children encounters in its educational provision for the children of occupational Travellers. This school was established in 2000 under a joint initiative by the Australian federal and Queensland state governments, entailing the construction of two mobile classrooms with dedicated teaching and support staff who follow the agricultural show circuits along the eastern and central states and territories of Australia. One clear imperative of the school is to break the cycle of functional illiteracy within the show community. Thus literacy is a priority area within the school's curriculum areas, and also informs discussions about the provision of adult education to the show community as well as plans for extending the school to include early childhood education.

The paper canvasses debates about the concept and value of literacy and argues that the notion of 'multiliteracies' is one way of articulating the diverse and complex forms of making sense that characterise the interactions between the school and the show

community. Within this framework, we can explore the ways in which the school seeks to add value to the show community and to formalise its educational outcomes while acknowledging the rich and diverse literacies that the show people have developed to engage with the multiple landscapes and communities through which they travel. We begin with a discussion of the concept of multiliteracies, then proceed to a consideration of the methods of data collection and analysis from which this article has been generated. We follow that with a discussion of findings based on interviews with the Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, who is also the lead author of this paper. As members of a writing team, we have elected to refer to the lead author as the Principal, rather than to refer to her by name or as "I". This textual approach is potentially textually awkward, because we use the third person to write about the lead member of our writing team. Nevertheless this approach is designed to emphasise and value her role as the Principal, which we argue elsewhere (Fullerton, Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, under review) is extending the boundaries of what is conventionally understood as the work of a school leader. We conclude the paper by considering some implications of this research for rural education more broadly and for understanding and promoting learning as rural engagement in particular.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The issue of literacy continues to attract debate within political, educational and wider community circles. For many people, a grounding in the three Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic is still the cornerstone of a sound education. For others, such a focus is regarded as narrow and anachronistic, failing to take account of developments in technology and devaluing alternative forms of learning and making sense of the world. According to this position, even the term 'literacy' is problematic, given its implicit attachment to systems of reading and writing and its intrinsic disregard of those oral, visual and electronic circuits of communication that increasingly connect the world today. Within this perspective, extending the semantic purview of literacy to encompass 'visual literacy' or 'electronic literacy' involves a form of symbolic capture in which one traditional and educationally sanctioned form of communication exerts a hold over other forms of communication with very different protocols, procedures, structures and forms of value. That within these terms 'literacy' takes the form of the privileged noun while 'visual' and 'electronic' are accorded the position of supporting adjectives emphasises the mechanism of semantic control at work.

Certainly, it is important for educationalists and linguists to be attendant to these semantic power plays, for they have real consequences for the lived experiences of communities. Those groups who have traditionally lacked access to the privileged noun of 'literacy' as it has been configured and sanctified within formal education institutions have tended to be marginalised and relatively disadvantaged (see also Smyth & Down, this issue). But it is not enough simply to dismiss this focus on the value of literacy as politically motivated and inadequate for engaging with the multiple and complex forms of communication connecting diverse and dispersed groups of people today. The provision of literacy is still fundamentally important in providing access to bodies of knowledge and forms of learning that are culturally sanctioned, and that enable groups to access opportunities to improve their life chances. The show people recognise that fact and are particularly concerned with increasing their reserves of formal literacy.

We contend that the concept of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) provides a useful framework for responding to these dilemmas about the contested role of literacy. It also provides a way of thinking through strategies that connect the formal literacy provisions of the school with the wider and more informal sense-making techniques and communication methods that the show community has developed. Cope and Kalantzis use the term 'multiliteracies' to suggest the challenges facing literacy education in the increasingly complex context of cultural diversity and global interconnectedness. Rather than conceiving of literacy in the traditional sense of measuring the capacity to read and write, it is important to take account of multiple forms of literacy — including technological, visual and information literacies — that enable one to communicate effectively across a number of different contexts with multiple audiences. The multiliteracies approach recognises that people take on diverse and multilayered identities to engage with a range of interactions. Rather than emphasise teaching rules of standard use, the multiliteracies framework focuses on 'designs of meaning': the maps and patterns that allow people to make sense of one another in a world of increasing local diversity and global connectedness. This framework is promoted through situated practice, immersing students in real world scenarios and working to uncover patterns in meaning and communication (see for example Danaher, 2004).

It is in its evident connection with the lived experience of the show community that the term 'multiliteracies' has particular value, accommodating the fluid and flexible

lifestyle of the community. Just as the concept of multiliteracies unsettles the semantic and institutional positioning and valuing of literacy, the mobile show community's itinerancy (see also Hartley and Harreveld, this issue) unsettles conventional categories and binary oppositions such as mobile–settled, urban–rural, formal education–informal learning and so forth. While the show community spends much of the year travelling, its sense of itself as an established, permanent community is secured through enduring relationships and familial connections with the show circuits that have been passed down across multiple generations. The incidence of extended family networks seems much more a feature of the show community than it does in ostensibly settled communities.

Officially the show school comes under the jurisdiction of Education Queensland's Mt Gravatt District Office in Brisbane, so it has an urban focus. But as the school spends most of the year on the road, it and the show community have a distinctly rural sensibility, engaging with the climatic variations and fluctuations in agricultural industries that are characteristic of this constituency. Indeed, the community is particularly attuned to the differences between and within the multiple urban and rural communities through which they travel. This experience helps generate the diverse understandings, forms of knowledge and styles of literacy that the community members develop: the capacity to make do and to contrive solutions on the run to help keep the show on the road; the ability to adjust their language and sales pitch to appeal to different audiences; the willingness to absorb technological innovations ranging from computers and mobile telephones to new rides and sideshow attractions to help keep their businesses viable. Though in one sense these forms of learning and literacy are informal, developed outside the boundaries of formal educational institutions, they have been as vital for the show community as a trade certificate or a university degree has been to members of other communities.

Yet there is increasing cognisance within the show community that these traditional forms of informal learning are not enough. As governments seek increasingly to validate knowledge through formal institutions, there is an awareness of the need for community members to have their skills and knowledge credentialed through exposure to such institutions. Such credentialing will enable show people to be successful within the more general community where formal qualifications are currently and increasingly necessary. In this sense, the provision of formal learning is understood as a means of adding value to the show community, equipping its members with a greater range of

options and increased social mobility. It can be appreciated that the importance of formal education can also be more basic, such as in relation to the issue of schooling retention (see also Walker-Gibbs and Smyth & Down, this issue).

METHODS

The research methods adopted in this study incorporated several design aspects used by the researchers in previous studies into the education of Travellers and/or their children (see Moriarty & Hallinan, 2001). For example, the researchers worked as a team to interview the participants themselves rather than involve research assistants in this aspect of the study. Being able to interview the participants first hand, especially on site, is informative in a way that is unable to be replicated if research assistants conduct the interviews and then make the data available to the researchers.

The four researchers (Moriarty, Danaher, Kenny & Danaher, 2004) conducted their semi-structured interviews with adults and children associated with the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children over a seven-day period in August 2003. The interviews were held at the school and at sites locally, as determined in consultation with the interviewees. Some interviews involved one interviewer and one or more interviewees, while other interviews were conducted with two or more interviewers and one or more interviewees. The arrangements for interviews were decided on the basis of what was most convenient or desirable from the interviewees' perspectives.

When the researchers have the opportunity to conduct interviews or focus group sessions as a team, they can later share their perceptions and determine whether they each have the same interpretation or whether there are points that need further clarification with the interviewees. The audiotapes of those interviews at which all researchers were not present were listened to and discussed by the researchers as a group in the evenings. Conducting the observations and interviews over an intensive period, mostly on site, facilitated the approach taken by the researchers, in particular enabling them to share perceptions of their experiences during periods of travel as well as between interviews.

The interviews for this study form part of a continuing research project (begun in 1992) involving the researchers and the mobile population of Australian show people (see for example Danaher, 1998, 2001). Previous interviewing ceased in 2000, just before the transfer of responsibility for educational provision for Australian show

children from the Brisbane School of Distance Education to the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children. The interviews from the present study, therefore, constituted the researchers' first opportunity to record the views of students, parents, staff and show community members with regard to the educational experiences and aspirations of or for the children after the new school had been operating for three years. The interviews also highlighted the kinds of opportunities that this type of schooling provided for show children to experience and learn about the world.

In total, 35 people, including educators, students and parents, participated in the interviews. One other person was ill at the time and was unable to participate.

The interview data provided information about:

- the school's operations
- what the participants in the study considered show children need in their education today
- the school's role in providing that education
- what else could be done to assist show children to receive the most effective education for living in the early 21st century
- issues that students, parents, staff and show community members think are important for non-show people to know about show people and their education.

The interview transcriptions were studied carefully to identify themes, convergences and divergences in relation to the interviewees' educational experiences and aspirations. The data were also examined in order to identify key issues raised during the interviews. These issues clustered around the following themes: cultural renewal; pedagogical innovation; and social transformation (see also Allison & Douglas, Harreveld and Smyth & Down, this issue). Within each of these themes, for which the data from each of the stakeholder groups were considered separately, several categories emerged. These categories related to supporting factors (which assisted the work of the school), limiting factors (which could be considered outside the control of the school and its community) and possibilities for future development (Moriarty, Danaher, Kenny & Danaher, 2004).

This article formalises the continuing relationship between the researchers and the Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, by placing the Principal as the lead author of the article and by using her words, recorded and transcribed in a series of interviews in August 2003 as part of the aforementioned research trip, as the article's sole direct data source. In doing so, we are cognisant that the experiences and perceptions of other stakeholders (such as the children, their parents and staff members of the school) are being filtered through the Principal's words and perceptual framework. On the other hand, these other stakeholders' words

have been and will be quoted directly in other publications. In any case, the Principal's perspective is distinctive and warrants being highlighted in this text: she has a longstanding knowledge of the show community, having been an inaugural member of the teaching team from the Brisbane School of Distance Education who worked with the show children from 1989, and having been appointed as foundation Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children on its establishment in 2000 (see also Fullerton, Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, under review). The next section of this article therefore deploys another 'take' on multiliteracies, by having the Principal simultaneously enacting the roles of lead author and sole direct respondent in the data analysis section of the text.

RESULTS

Clearly manifested in the semi-structured interview data analysed for this article is the predominant theme of 'both ways' linking of forms of knowledge, informed by a multiliteracies conceptual framework. By this we mean that:

- there is strong evidence of efforts by the Principal to recognise and value the show people's informal and traditional knowledge, including multiple ways of understanding and engaging with the world;
- there is equally strong evidence that many show parents want to assist the school in developing formal literacy skills in their children, as a means of extending the range of their possible future engagements with the world.

As we argue in the final section of the article, this 'both ways' intersection of forms of knowledge – of multiliteracies – provides one possible way of educational institutions engaging regional and rural communities and *vice versa*, and therefore of developing strategies that respond to the educational and social dilemmas currently confronting such communities.

The Principal's words during a number of interviews in August 2003 reflected her strong commitment to recognising, valuing and incorporating into the formal school curriculum the informal and traditional forms of knowledge and literacies of the show people. As she stated, "Where would we be if there hadn't been that level of mutual respect?....[T]hat's the whole key to the success of the school". This ideological position accorded strongly with the distinction mentioned earlier between the privileged, singular noun 'literacy' and the decentred, multiple noun 'multiliteracies': the understanding that ways of making sense of the world are situated and contingent resonates with a commitment to displaying this kind of "mutual respect" between home and school.

The Principal provided a number of examples of how, despite in many cases not having high levels of formal literacy, show people deploy other forms of literacy not generally exhibited by non-show people. One example was the way that many show children remember their birthdays according to the town where the show is located on that particular date. Another example was the show people's rich oral culture and their handing down to subsequent generations of stories and songs about their traditional heroes:

> When you go to a showman's funeral, everybody stands up and speaks beautifully. — orally delivers most beautifully. At...[a show child's] grandfather's funeral, it was a recitation really of a beautiful ballad that's nine pages long. Everybody knew it off by heart. I was reading the words; everybody else knew it off by heart. It was really fabulous!

Both these instances signified the show community's enduring relationships and extended family connections across multiple generations that we argued earlier help to disrupt such binaries as mobile–settled and formal education–informal learning and that provide a stable yet fluid environment for the enactment of the show people's multiliteracies.

At the same time, the Principal recognised the vital need for these informal and traditional literacies to be connected with formal and officially sanctioned literacy, without the formal literacy taking over and smothering the informal literacies:

> Our kids have got great memories. They will remember and recall, and then what we've been able to do at school is that we've given them the language to discuss and interpret and go forward and just still being to have that innate inquisitive behaviour to want to find out more. No school can just do that between nine and three [o'clock]. That's in absolute mutual cooperation between home and school — that's where it happens.

This statement demonstrated the Principal's awareness that literacies are located simultaneously in multiple sites. Furthermore, she was implicitly acknowledging that the multiliteracies focus on 'designs of meaning' and 'real world scenarios' resonates strongly with the school's building on and extending the show children's existing, informal literacies. This is in marked contrast to an approach of setting up formal literacy in opposition to the children's lived experiences of the world.

According to the Principal, a key dilemma faced by show people was gaining access to formal literacy within the context of living and working a mobile lifestyle:

> So all those wonderful skills are there, but the actual traditional educational view, or the educated view of what is intelligence and what is how you make it and what is normal, was always outside of what show families could achieve. It wasn't until we really got started and you realised that there are millions of

people out there who can't read. Always the traditional itinerant families missed out.

At the same time, the Principal had clearly thought through, and was putting into practice, potentially useful strategies for promoting formal literacy among parents as well as children. One example related to the assignment of particular parents to drive children to and from school on designated days: "So that's why we did rosters, which was another reason to have it in print because it's another link to literacy". Another example was sending material home with the children:

> Like I was saying to you about when the postcard goes home, you read the postcard to everybody just before home time, just in case there's somebody near the door, or they've come into the classroom. So they've got a bit of a model. That's just good infant practice. You're immersing everybody in every aspect of literacy whether it's verbal or auditory or print-based; whether it's from using computers; whether it's a digital camera. Everything that you can get your hands on you should model so that people gain confidence with it and they become skilled. If they're confident then they'll have a go.

The accuracy of this last statement can be seen in the long list of informal literacies outlined earlier that the show people have deployed traditionally, ranging from 'spruiking' on a joint or ride to buying new equipment to running a business. The Principal acknowledged and valued those traditional abilities and perceived them as a sound foundation for the development of more formal literacy skills.

For the Principal, a crucial dimension of this simultaneous promotion of formal literacy among parents and children was the potentially transformative role of such literacy in fostering productive social change. She encapsulated this view of the power of literacy in this way:

> Why are we changing the school? Why are we educating everyone? So we can break not only the cycle of illiteracy but [also] health problems and drug issues and prejudice and racism and everything else that happens...

One specific example of literacy as an intended facilitator of social change in the social community was teaching the children – and their parents – about the routines of school life:

> That's exactly what it was like, so we had all the girls and boys, like learning to sit in a chair and how to speak and what it meant to come at nine o'clock and what it meant to go home at three [o'clock]. For the mums, they couldn't go and have a long lunch. You can't do it; the kids are waiting. How to do homework; how to read a book. That's really more the intellectual quality of what we've done with school, but all those social things about just even getting up in time to get to school.

This statement contained a vivid signifier of the children's formal education as a not necessarily easy meeting ground between the school system's formal literacy and the show community's informal multiliteracies. According to this approach, the school seeks to negotiate and implement a mediation between the different rhythms and routines of life at school and life on the showgrounds. The statement is a useful reminder that dilemmas and the strategies needed to resolve them exist within such communities, as well as in the spaces between those communities and the broader society.

The Principal also communicated her view of the relative locations and responsibilities of home and school for promoting particular kinds of technological literacy:

> For what the next century and the century after that's going to involve – the rise of the computerised [age]. The families are hoping to move into computers. They'd do anything to buy their kids a laptop, but the download costs are just obscene. It's unfair to even suggest that our parents try and download using or connect using mobile 'phones because it's $5 a minute. It's just ridiculous. The classroom practice is really the key to bringing about change on all levels...

While this view placed a considerable weight of responsibility on the school and on the Principal in particular, it reflected her conviction that a mutually respectful and 'both ways' approach to bringing together the formal education of school and the informal learning of home – including in relation to multiliteracies – can be very powerful and can bring about undreamed of social transformation.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The argument has been presented in this article that the Australian show community experiences distinctive challenges in linking formal and informal forms of sense-making and hence in using learning to (re-)engage its members. Yet the significance of that argument lies in its potential implications for understanding and actioning learning as rural engagement. Some of the dilemmas confronting the show people are similar to those facing members of rural communities, including distance from and sometimes misunderstanding by and of others and lack of reliable access to a number of goods and services that metropolitan residents take for granted (see also Hartley, Harreveld and Smyth & Down, this issue). Another similarity is that both groups of people often have strong family ties over a number of generations and sets of skills and sense-making that

have been finely honed over those generations but that generally lack currency in formal educational settings.

Yet the argument advanced in this article has been that formal education – in the form of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children and its Principal – has also provided some potential strategies for addressing those dilemmas. In particular, the Principal's efforts to build bridges of contact and crossover between the show people's informal multiliteracies and the school system's formal literacy constitute an important strategy of promoting education in the show community, which from some perspectives is a 'regional area'. Indeed, as we asserted above, the 'both ways' character of this contact and crossover is crucial to its possible success, by ensuring that the formal curriculum is attentive to the children's lived experiences and at the same time providing them – and as far as possible their parents – with access to the officially sanctioned skills that they are presumed to need for the future.

This 'both ways' approach to promoting the children's multiliteracies both in their mobile classroom and on the showgrounds resonates with equivalent efforts by rural principals to maximise links between school and home in their respective communities (see for example Crothers, 2004). This approach resonates also with our previous synthesis of the perceived implications for reinvigorating Australian rural education of our account of the informal learning of Australian circus people:

> We argue, therefore, that a reinvigorated Australian rural education is likely to result from two simultaneous processes: a constant and consistent resistance of marginalising discourses of 'rurality'; and the enactment of strategies to celebrate the positive dimensions of what makes rural communities 'different', while at the same time emphasising that the similarities between rural people and other Australians justifies their demand for equitable access to educational provision. (Danaher, Hallinan & Moriarty, 1999, p. 6)

Furthermore, these links and resonances accord strongly with Eversole's (2001) identification of three specific strategies needed to enhance rural Australians' access to educational services: "…via innovative delivery style, diversification of the client base, and differentiation of educational products" (p. 85). In the United States, Hughes (1999) argued that differences between higher and lower achieving rural schools were due to the nature of school programs and the expectations of teachers, rather than to the attitudes of students (see also Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, 2003).

We contend that taking up the challenges of multiliteracies, in the way that the Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children has done, is one important way of enacting these kinds of strategies, and thereby of using learning to

engage the show community – and potentially also rural communities. As the Principal – and this paper's lead author – stated:

> The whole action…of the school is like a starburst sort of firecracker…and it's just gone out there. You see change at so many different levels. Certainly…[the school] gives a legitimacy or a credence to the society of the showmen and their heritage and their skills and the wonderful things that they did. But more importantly it gives the children the skills for the…[future] and that's what their parents and that's what I want to see too.

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