CHAPTER 9

'POWER/KNOWLEDGE' AND THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS OF AUSTRALIAN SHOW PEOPLE

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Abstract

A Foucauldian perspective reveals how 'knowledge' can be complicit with 'power' in privileging some individuals and groups while marginalising others. This crucial point alerts educational researchers to the ethical and political implications of recording itinerant people's reflections on their educational experiences and their expectations of alternative forms of schooling. Thus the Australian show people's general dissatisfaction with the learning opportunities available in the past has fuelled their determined lobbying for a separate school for show children; here the demand for a specific form of knowledge provision articulates with the show people's engagement with state and institutional power. The chapter illustrates this argument by drawing on the senior author's semi-structured interviews with show children, parents, home tutors and teachers in five sites between 1992 and 1996.

Introduction

More than many fields of education, Traveller and nomadic education attests overtly to the crucial role of power in ensuring equity of educational access. More particularly, most of the mobile groups discussed in this volume demonstrate the deleterious effects of non-

access to the specialised educational provision required for itinerant people. This demonstration reflects the broader, often hidden but always close association between education and power.

This chapter illustrates the complex negotiations of 'power/knowledge' conjunctures within Traveller and nomadic education by reference to the publicly stated educational experiences and expectations of Australian show people in the early and mid 1990s. We analyse the senior author's semi-structured interviews with selected show people from a Foucauldian perspective that constructs interview utterances as texts embodying 'power/knowledge'. By this we mean that the show people's discourses about 'education', 'knowledge' and 'learning' are suffused with a recognition of themselves as located within various educational imperatives, a recognition that derives from their situated engagements with institutions of power, including educational authorities. Their approach underpins their reflections upon their previous educational experiences, their articulation of their expectations for more appropriate provision in the future, and their lobbying those they see as having access to power to facilitate the fulfilment of their expectations.

The chapter has three parts. Firstly, we outline the context of educational provision for Australian show people, including the political framework of such provision and the show people's organisational framework for engaging with that provision. Secondly, we apply a 'power/knowledge' analysis to selected show people's interview statements about their educational experiences and expectations. Thirdly, we interrogate the utility of 'power/knowledge' as a conceptual framework for researching Traveller and nomadic education for other itinerant groups in Australia and in other countries. We assert the value of considering the shifting and complex moves between relations of power and forms of knowledge in current and future research into the education of itinerant people.

The Context of Educational Provision for Australian Show People

Australian educational provision, as with so many elements of its public life, reflects the nation's colonial history. The federation of six autonomous colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 has continued for almost one hundred years full of the political anomalies and tensions that such an event made predictable. Although the Commonwealth has steadily acquired more and more powers during this century, the rhetorical call of 'States' rights' remains a powerful discourse in Australian politics. In Australia, the principal combatants are the Federal and State governments, rather than the national government and the local authorities that operate in England, for example.

This political situation is clearly reflected in Australian educational provision. State governments are responsible for early childhood, primary school and secondary school provision, while the Commonwealth is charged with providing higher education, primarily the thirty-six public universities and the vocational Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system. At the school level, variability among States remains a striking feature. For example, States range widely in their degree of (de)centralisation, and most States have some kind of subject-based common 'leaving' examination but varying 'mixes' between the examination and on-course assessment. Efforts to develop a National Curriculum in the late 1980s and early 1990s floundered on the rocks of Commonwealth–State politicking, and currently eight national Key Learning Areas from preschool to Year 10 (P-10) are being implemented variously from one State to another.

Within this politically volatile situation, two principal discourses can be identified as underpinning educational discussions – and indeed broader social debates – in Australia over the past fifteen years or so. One of these is the 'social justice' discourse (or what Bailey [1999] identified as "the liberal tradition" of education [p. 10]), which recognises the considerable – and many say steadily growing – disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have

nots' in terms of access to education and other forms of cultural, financial and symbolic capital. This discourse also accepts the corollary recognition of the need for specialised 'compensatory' or 'levelling' provision in an effort to reduce the gap of opportunity and outcome.

The other, and largely opposed, discourse is that of 'economic rationalism' (which Bailey [1999] identified as "the business case" for education [p. 11]). This discourse is increasingly used to underpin calls for the privatisation of government assets, and is frequently associated with catchcries of 'accountability', 'competition' and 'efficiency'. The 'economic rationalist' discourse is currently linked in Australia with the marketisation of education, particularly higher education, where ideas such as student vouchers and greater mobility among institutions have been mooted. Debate centred on this discourse becomes especially unclear when trying to establish governments' 'core business' – that is, those services that governments must provide because it is unprofitable for the private sector to do so. The 'economic rationalist' discourse is largely at odds with the education of itinerant people, who in western countries are numerically small populations for whom the provision of specialised education is accordingly 'inefficient' and 'unjustifiable' in terms of the use of resources.

These competing discourses, and the tensions in political – including educational – governance to which they relate, would appear to be inherently unsympathetic to the distinctive educational needs of itinerant people, who in the preceding analysis would be classified as among the 'have nots'. However, Australian show people have been able to exploit many of the ambiguities and tensions characterising Australian politics and education to assert their rights for a specialised provision to match their distinctive needs. Their capacity to do so derives in large part from their organisational framework. There are four distinct occupational groups on Australian showgrounds: members of the Showmen's Guild

of Australasia (formed in 1927), 'itinerants', 'workers' and 'horsey people' (Danaher, 1998). The most prestigious group is the Guild members, who typically own the rides and stalls that make up 'sideshow alley'. Guild membership is tightly regulated, and the Guild speaks with a single and powerful voice in its dealings with the respective show societies along the circuits that its members travel. The Guild's operations constitute a different manifestation of the 'power/knowledge' situation from most itinerant groups (who generally have far less political nous and lobbying capacity), to the degree that those operations transform, in certain fundamental respects, the show people from a 'marginalised' to a 'minority' group (Moriarty, Danaher & Rose, 1998). Certainly the Guild is far more able to speak with a single voice than its Australian circus equivalent, the Circus Federation of Australasia, although there are also crucial contextual and organisational differences to consider (Danaher, 1999).

The foregoing discussion has indicated that individual learners are situated within networks of 'power/knowledge', such as when they recognise (know) themselves in certain ways (for example, as autonomous learners, as being manipulated by government or as belonging to a particular nation state). This situatedness of learners creates provisional opportunities for itinerant people such as the show people to carve out spaces in which they can agitate for the specialised provision that they claim as their right, using a 'social justice' discourse to counteract the prevailing 'economic rationalist' discourse. We turn now to examine in detail these shifting discourses, and the associated operation of 'power/knowledge', at work in the show people's statements about their educational experiences and expectations.

'Power/Knowledge' and Educating Australian Show People

Michel Foucault is one theorist for whom questions of the relationship between power and knowledge have become crucial (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000). Eschewing a 'top–

down' model that conceives of power as a monolithic force imposed by dominant social groups, Foucault posits power in terms of various articulations of force circulating throughout the social body and shaping people's understandings of themselves and their relations to the world in which they act. So for Foucault power is force, not a substance, a force that is fluid and productive, and not merely coercive. Power cannot be conceived except in terms of its relations, relations that range from the microphysical to the global, and that can be traced in terms of the strategies, techniques and practices within which such relations are enacted.

Two techniques of power with which Foucault has been interested are disciplinary power and bio-power. From the seventeenth century western societies, Foucault suggests that the power to administer life evolved in two basic forms: the first, disciplinary in character, focussing on the body as a productive machine, and the second, bio-power, focussing on the body as a living organism, serving the basis of biological processes: birth, health and so on.

The field of mass education as it emerged in the western world in the second half of the nineteenth century (Coombes, 1996) entailed the articulation of the mechanics of disciplinary and bio-power within assorted forms of knowledge. Disciplinary power worked through various sites, including schools, in the service of moulding subject bodies fit for productive labour. It also found expression in the emergence of various disciplines of knowledge within the educational field, the mastery of which accorded credentialled individuals relatively privileged and influential positions within the social space. The aim of bio-power to regulate a secure population was actualised in schools' location within the life of local communities, impacting upon children's growth and development into respectable, civil subjects.

We begin our discussion of the 'power/knowledge' nexus from the Foucauldian perspective outlined above in relation to the education of Australian show people by referring to the research design accompanying the data presented below (see Moriarty and Danaher

[1998] for more detailed information). Between 1992 and 1996 a group of researchers from Central Queensland University conducted a series of annual visits to show people gathered at specific sites. The interviews were conducted both on the showgrounds and at the local school or hall where the Brisbane School of Distance Education teachers worked with the show children for the few days that the show was in that town. The researchers found that the show people became increasingly prepared to participate in interviews as they became more comfortable about the researchers' *bona fides* and particularly about the uses to which the researchers put the 'power' derived from their 'knowledge' of the show people's lives. For example, the show people were aware, and implicitly approved of the fact, that the researchers used a videotape produced from the research (Danaher, Hallinan, Kindt, Moriarty, Rose, Thompson & Wyer, 1995) in conference presentations to publicise the show people's educational experiences. Conversely, the show people themselves used the videotape as an additional resource when lobbying government officials for the establishment of a separate school for their children (which we discuss below).

The point that we are emphasising here is that the show people's communication of their educational experiences and expectations took place, not in a 'power vacuum', but rather in the institutionally situated context of a university research project. Presumably the researchers' interest was gratifying to the show people and reflected a valuing of a lifestyle that had been routinely denigrated and stereotyped. More importantly, perhaps the research project could help to empower the show people by enabling them to align themselves with the researchers' cultural capital in order to legitimate their call for specialised educational services for their children.

Within this context of a perceived coincidence of interests framing the 'knowledge' produced by the research project, the show people repeatedly drew attention to the inadequacy of previous educational provision. Show parents' earlier educational options had

included sending their children to boarding school, enrolling them at schools along the show circuits and giving up show business until their children had finished school. These options were resented respectively because they separated families, ensured interrupted learning and threatened continuity of livelihood. A former executive officer of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia summarised parental attitudes to education:

> So we find of course today that they get their heads together. They said, "Right, here we go. This is what it's got to start for, and we've got to not send our kids away to boarding school for the first twelve years of their life. We want them with us, and of course we don't want to have them battling through correspondence, and going into a school once every couple of weeks and being told, 'Draw that picture there', and the next school, 'Draw that picture'. 'But I drew it at the last school', 'Well, draw it again, you'll get good at it'".

> A parent described the "disorientating" effects of going to a new school every few days or week:

> You'd go and you'd come in a middle of a class that was doing English projects or something, and they were halfway through so you couldn't start, so you more or less watched what they did or read a book. It was not continuity or any full-on lessons or anything like that.

Significant here is the way in which the individual is made subject to forms of knowledge in such a way that she is disposed to make sense of herself in relation to such practices. When a member of the show community speaks in this way of being made aware of her alienation from a particular educational experience, this expresses the means through which she is situated within that 'power/knowledge' nexus. Thus practices at the educational 'coalface' work to situate subjects in the 'power/knowledge' nexus in a way that affirms to them their relative position.

The same speaker cited above acknowledged that teachers varied in their willingness and capacity to maximise learning in this situation:

And I will say sometimes you went and the teacher was enthusiastic to try. If you were willing to learn, then the teacher was enthusiastic to try and give you something. But they realised it was effortless; it was only a week and how much could they do, but you did have some. And then you had some teachers that purposely just put you on the side [of the classroom] because it was just too much hassle to put anything into you in a few days.

This attribution of responsibility for a disempowering educational experience to systemic failure rather than individual culpability is important. It reflects an awareness of the 'power/knowledge' nexus, by locating schooling in the broader political field of how the state treats minority groups such as the show people. Several show people referred to the overwhelmingly alienating impact of this educational neglect, for example by identifying an entire generation of show people without formal literacy. Whereas previously those people could be absorbed into the economy of the show community, it was increasingly recognised that future show people would no longer be able to elude the state's demand for formal qualifications. In other words, 'knowledge' – or the absence of it – was not only disempowering but also extending the state's powerful reach into traditionally quarantined show life.

The 'power/knowledge' nexus was also evident in show people's discussions of the education program that since 1989 the Brisbane School of Distance Education provided for their children. The program involved teachers from the school travelling to selected sites along the two Queensland show circuits to teach the children face to face, and the children continuing their correspondence lessons with home tutors when the teachers returned to Brisbane. Parents had lobbied for the program's establishment in direct response to the

inadequacies of earlier provision. They therefore felt greater involvement in and ownership of their children's education. According to one mother, "Now with the program...we have a gauge, a learning system that we can control". A woman who had married into show life summarised the program's perceived strengths:

> I think the program itself is excellent. I mean, it would be nearly be impossible if the program wasn't made available. It's something that they have where they were having nothing in the years past.

> At the same time, the show people's greater ownership prompted them to suggest ongoing program improvements that were directly responsive to their itinerant lifestyle:

> And you've got to build up all this stuff [the children's correspondence materials]. And you live in a place this big. It's just so hard when you've got that much bulk. You need the material, and you need the information, but do you need the bulk?...We met another lady [one of the teachers],...and she's writing programs that cut out the bulk. She's standardising and more integrative.

What is demonstrated here is the show community's perceived need to assert its identity by inserting itself actively into that form of education, as if to emphasise the difference between its interests and those of the educational authority. Such an articulation of difference provides the show community with some purchase on the 'power/knowledge' nexus as it circulates from the 'elsewhere' of the educational authority.

As the program progressed, many show people began lobbying for what they regarded as the next logical step along the path of equitable provision for occupational Travellers: a separate school for show children. At the time of writing, the school has been gazetted and a principal appointed. The rationale for a school dedicated to show children was the need to recognise and cater to their unique educational needs, which would otherwise be subsumed

into a distance education program predicated on its students living in fixed locations. According to one mother, those students live:

> ...out a hundred k[ilometre]s on a [cattle or sheep] property, and they come to town every so often, and they're contactable and they're there. Our kids are completely a different system. So we can't take their rules and make them work for us. And we've done it for a few years, and we've found it's just inhibiting us too much on what we can strive for and do for. And we are specialised, so therefore we should specialise on us.

This statement reflects an awareness of the double meaning of 'rules': procedures necessary to ensure a program's smooth operations, but also a potential stifling of a minority group's "different" and "specialised" nature.

The provision of educational opportunity within the Brisbane School of Distance Education, then, is framed within a history of alienation and neglect, which helped to produce the show children as in some way 'other' and abnormal with respect to educational outcomes. Such a situatedness was not entirely disempowering, since it could be mobilised in a resistive discourse to reinforce the show community's sense of itself as being outside the governmental purview and the constraints of mainstream society, relatively free to live out a somewhat exotic existence 'on the road'. This resistive discourse operates as a response to the regulation of social practices within circuits of 'power/knowledge', a regulation that is predicated in part on the production of scandals and sites of abnormality. It also shows how these sites can empower the scandalous community in constituting points of provisional resistance to dominant discourses and socially sanctioned practices.

Within the Australian context, ongoing attempts to stabilise and normalise show children's educational experiences have met with an avowed recognition by the show community that their children's future can be safeguarded by accessing socially sanctioned

forms of knowledge and positions of relative power and security that accrue from them. This is an example of a 'moment' when a perception of a coincidence of interests occurs between a particular social group and the governmental agencies that frame its experiences in particular forms of knowledge. We can see this perception expressed in the way in which the show community has responded positively to both the education program provided by the Brisbane School of Distance education and the Central Queensland University Traveller education research project: as a result of these initiatives, show people have been disposed to secure themselves within the networks of educational provision to a greater extent than they had previously.

'Power/Knowledge' and International Diversity in Traveller and Nomadic Education
Research

What, then, does our argument of the inextricable links between 'power' and 'knowledge' in Traveller and nomadic education mean for researchers in that 'field'? Probably the first and most obvious point to make is that these links throw into stark clarity the systemic inequities of educational access and provision. Among other findings, this volume demonstrates that those inequities occur in Africa, Australia, India and Western Europe, as the state sanctions particular forms of knowledge and processes for its acquisition and other forms and processes that it marginalises.

This volume also demonstrates the variability of contexts – economic, historical, political and sociocultural – from one nation to another, a variability that ensures enormous diversity in the forms taken by the complex interplay of forces within Traveller and nomadic education (including variations on experiences of colonialism and postcolonialism). We assert that, while the 'power/knowledge' nexus is likely to be crucial to any specific instance

of Traveller and nomadic education, researchers will need to attend, carefully and explicitly, to divergences in the manifestations of that nexus.

Such divergences are both spatial and temporal. In spatial terms, it is important to map the particular relations of power that manifest themselves in different educational fields across separate national states. In temporal terms, it is important to recognise the dynamic character of these relations, at the same time avoiding a simplistic teleological or evolutionary narrative that conceives of the relationship between state educational authorities and groups like the show community as becoming progressively closer and more productive over time. The educational field might rather be understood as a series of moments constituted by varying degrees of conjuncture and disjuncture, complicity and resistance among different interest groups. The field of education is, then, the site of an ongoing game involving moves that are designed towards achieving capture or resistance. This game is characterised by unstable relations of power and shifting forms of knowledge that are 'up for grabs' and subject to provisional realignments as the discourses such as 'social justice' and 'economic rationalism' identified at the beginning of this chapter struggle for dominance (while always allowing for the possibility of the emergence of other discourses).

Traveller and nomadic education researchers also need to avoid, as far as possible, being complicit in replicating or even extending the marginalisation of the itinerant people whose 'power/knowledge' nexus they are investigating. A crucial implication of this timely reminder, and an intended outcome of the publication of this volume, is the necessary opportunity for researchers to engage in dialogue with one another about issues such as the situatedness of Traveller and nomadic education provision and research within diverse institutionally sanctioned forms of knowledge. This is needed to ensure that several approaches to the same topics are developed and compared, less with a view to synthesis than with a commitment to avoid privileging one view over another. The Foucauldian perspective

applied in this chapter is helpful in this regard, because it demonstrates comprehensively the situatedness of knowing positions and at the same time the complexity of portraying that situatedness.

As an example of what we mean by this, there is the debate about the utility of terms such as 'marginalised' that are often applied to itinerant people. Clearly an important corollary of the 'power/knowledge' nexus explored in this paper is the likelihood that mobile groups are indeed marginalised (Umar, 1999). On the other hand, care needs to be taken that labels such as 'marginalised' are not used in ways that further disempower Traveller and nomadic people and that do not, by essentialising their difference, 'deprive' them analytically of the agency that all social groups have at their disposal to resist and subvert marginalisation (Danaher, in press).

All of this suggests that focusing on the 'power/knowledge' nexus in Traveller and nomadic education research is an appropriate reminder that researchers are themselves powerful figures, possessed of considerable cultural capital and frequently called on to advise governments about educational provision for itinerant people. In the view of the authors of this chapter, we need to make that nexus explicit in relation to both our own research and the investigations of our colleagues – to celebrate our partiality at the same time that we critique it. We certainly argue against a view that Traveller and nomadic education researchers should aspire to gather and report 'objective' and 'unbiased' knowledge that is somehow removed from the relations of power and considerations of interest that inform it. There is no such 'pure and untarnished' knowledge, and claims that there is ignore the 'power' dimension of that knowledge, to the detriment of research and ultimately of Traveller and nomadic people.

Conclusion

In the penultimate paragraph of *Traveller children: A voice for themselves*, Kiddle (1999) wrote of the need for a new "terrain" in Traveller education in England:

> Education and pride in themselves is the power that parents and teachers can jointly give to the children – a power to develop self-esteem, a power for choice, a power to defend against exploitation...I have no illusion about the immense difficulties that presents for both parents and teachers, Traveller and non-Traveller, but I do not care to contemplate the alternative future for the children. (p. 156)

Here Kiddle has alerted us to a key corollary of our focus in this chapter on the 'power/knowledge' nexus in researching Traveller and nomadic education. That is, researchers need to facilitate situations in which itinerant people themselves have the capacity to determine their own educational futures, because it is only through greater 'ownership' of the positions through which socially sanctioned knowledge is transmitted that the commitment of itinerant people to these processes might be secured. We do not pretend that that is an easy transition to make, nor that it is analytically straightforward to identify the most efficacious ways of making it happen. We are convinced, however, that it will not happen unless Traveller and nomadic education researchers routinely ask the following kinds of questions: Whose interests are and are not being served in current and potential Traveller and nomadic education provision? Whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in researching that provision? Asking and answering such questions are indispensable if we are to understand the social power of the information that we gather and report in our research, and understanding and critiquing that power is equally crucial if we are to contribute to the new "terrain" for itinerant people for which Kiddle (1999) has called. This argument is yet another manifestation of the fundamental role of the 'power/knowledge' nexus in researching Traveller and nomadic education.

Acknowledgments

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