

# Interactions with Queensland show children: Enhancing knowledge of educational contexts

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This paper analyses one element of Shulman's (1987) categories of the teacher knowledge base - knowledge of educational contexts - in relation to the education of Queensland travelling show children. This knowledge includes three sets of interactions: the children's relationships on and off the show circuits, the children's interactions with their teachers, and the teachers' interactions with the children's parents and home tutors. The concepts of 'border crossing' (Giroux, 1990) and 'boundary maintenance' (Barth, 1969) underscore the importance of show children and their teachers being able to cross the boundaries between show life and formal schooling.

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## BACKGROUND

The formation of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia in 1927 was a formal acknowledgment of the fact that travelling show families were already an integral part of Australian cultural life. The Showmen's Guild paralleled in several ways the slightly older Showmen's Guild of Great Britain which adopted that title in 1917, having been formed in 1889 as the United Kingdom Showman and Van Dwellers' Protection Association (Jordan, 1997). The Showmen's Guild of Australasia was instrumental in guiding and supporting a distinctive pattern of show circuits around Australia, and in calling for government recognition of its members' special circumstances.

In 1989, as part of this call for recognition, Guild members and other show people successfully lobbied the Queensland government to provide an education program to meet the specific needs of children who travel the coastal and western Queensland show circuits with their families. The program's chief feature is that, for a considerable proportion of the school year, teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education travel to meet the children at selected sites along both circuits, using a spare classroom or a community hall to conduct face-to-face lessons. When the teachers return to Brisbane, they resume the role of assessing the children's completed correspondence papers, the children generally being supervised in this activity by their parents or home tutors.[1] The Brisbane School of Distance Education, whose student population from preschool children to adult learners is about four and a half thousand and constitutes 50 per cent of Queensland's pre-tertiary distance students (Rasmussen, 1997), services a diverse range of target groups in a vast geographical area. The school's target groups include the show children, students living on outback properties, overseas students, students with medical conditions, home schoolers, teenagers 'at risk' and teenage ballet dancers enrolled at the Dance School of Excellence. Accordingly, the school is accustomed to responding to the different educational needs of a wider combination of client groups than is the case in many 'conventional' schools. It is therefore well equipped to

encourage the development of interaction skills that facilitate communication between its students and others outside their everyday environment. In other words, the Brisbane School of Distance Education may be better positioned than most regular schools to promote the kind of 'border crossing' described in this paper's theoretical framework.

Border crossing is an essential set of skills for show children to develop. They need to be able to communicate effectively with individuals and groups outside their everyday environment as they get older, because their ability to do this successfully might have implications for their education and employment. If they remain with the show circuits as adults, they might find themselves, like their parents, in situations in which they will need to negotiate with outside individuals or groups on behalf of their own children or their organisation. While maintaining a close affinity with the Showmen's Guild, therefore, the show children also need to learn the skills of border crossing.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Shulman (1987) proposed six categories of the teacher knowledge base:

- content knowledge;
- general pedagogical knowledge;
- curriculum knowledge;
- pedagogical content knowledge;
- knowledge of educational contexts; and
- knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values.

This categorisation highlights the crucial importance of identifying the multiple contexts within which teachers deploy these various kinds of knowledge and thereby discharge their professional responsibilities.

Recently, Taylor and McMeniman (1996) used Shulman's (1987) six categories of the teacher knowledge base as a theoretical perspective for analysing their interviews with three home tutors living in rural Queensland. This paper uses one of Shulman's categories - 'knowledge of educational contexts, ranging from the workings of the group or classroom, the governance and financing of school districts, to the character of communities' - as an interpretive lens for analysing selected results of a 5-year study of the educational experiences of Queensland travelling show children. The reason for our focus on this category is that it draws attention to a particular educational context with which most educators are unfamiliar: the situation in which students and their families are itinerant.

Our analysis is based on three sets of interactions deriving from the show children's education:

- the children's friendships within and outside the show circuits;
- the children's interactions with their teachers; and
- the teachers' interactions with the children's parents and home tutors.

We argue that the show children's education highlights the specialised nature of their educational contexts, and that this specialised nature creates certain influences on and challenges for interactions among the children, their parents, their home tutors and their teachers. In particular, we contend that these interactions need to take on the character of

'border crossing' (Giroux, 1990) between two cultural systems that have traditionally tended towards 'boundary maintenance' (Barth, 1969): the Queensland show circuits, and Education Queensland.

A dearth of research into educational itinerancy has led to an absence of well-developed theoretical perspectives in this field of study. Our research has drawn on two key strands of the theories grouped under the umbrella of 'marginalisation studies' that have relevance to this paper. The first strand encompasses the ways in which travelling show people, by virtue of their itinerant lifestyle, are regularly denied access to resources, including the routine of attending the same school in the same physical location every school day, that permanent residents take for granted. The second strand, drawing particularly on de Certeau (1984), includes the ways in which show people work actively to resist their marginalised status, by consuming educational and other resources according to their own agenda and their specialised needs, and in the process to subvert the marginalising strategies of a 'mainstream' predicated on fixed residence (Danaher, Wyr & Bartlett, 1998).

One evident corollary of the study's theoretical orientation is the potential for the replication of the two groups - 'the marginalisers' and 'the marginalised' - without an overall change to their relative positions. That is, if show people's actions are continually conceived as resisting strategies of marginalisation, there is little opportunity for them to move outside this ultimately limiting space. Another way of considering this situation is Barth's (1969) notion of 'boundary maintenance'. From this perspective, both the Showmen's Guild and Education Queensland might be portrayed as seeking to make use of what each other is offering, but with no real means of understanding each other or - even more radically - of crossing the boundaries and moving into each other's space.

This is where 'border crossing' (Giroux, 1990) becomes important. Giroux outlined several strategies of 'border pedagogy', whereby students from variously marginalised backgrounds could be equipped to move confidently back and forth between their own groups and the 'mainstream society'. For the show people and the Brisbane School of Distance Education teachers, 'border crossing' would enable them to see the other group's perspective, to recognise and value the differences between them, and to contribute to positive educational change whereby the show children's itinerancy would no longer preclude them from a continuous, quality education.[2]

## **METHODS**

One consequence of the dearth of research into educational itinerancy noted earlier has been the limited development of methodologies suited to the area of study. This lack was reflected in Minnis' (1985) complaint that most research in distance education (with which educational itinerancy shares some important similarities) was concentrated at the descriptive level and had concomitant limitations associated with sample dependency. Minnis stressed the importance of applying more substantial methodological approaches that could broaden the perspective to include areas such as anthropology or sociology. He proposed as possible approaches ethnography, case study or, as was used in this study, grounded theory, which originated with Glaser and Strauss (1967) and was refined by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Grounded theory was a logical methodological choice because of the complex and little understood lives of people who travel the show circuits and the necessity to understand the context within which the distance education program operates. Grounded theory offers a

framework for interrogating and questioning emerging interpretations of the data and progressively refining the analysis. Combined with a team approach to the research and an intensive period of fieldwork, planning and analysis were facilitated by the ongoing opportunities that the researchers had to compare notes and understandings, both in the field and between the data gathering phases.

### **The participants**

Over a five year period, from 1992 to 1996, 131 people on the coastal and western Queensland show circuits took part in interviews conducted in towns where shows were held. The participants were the show children, their parents, their home tutors and their teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education.

### **Data gathering**

One hundred and twelve semi-structured, audiotaped, face-to-face interviews were conducted by the research team who, as a group, spent several consecutive days at show sites each year. In the first year of the study, the interviews focussed on developing an understanding of the practical aspects of the implementation of the program as well as demographic and logistical details of the show circuits. Themes guiding subsequent data gathering included curriculum and pedagogy, participants' roles, social networks and peer relations, self-efficacy, work and play, and language use on the show circuits.

## **CHILDREN'S FRIENDSHIPS WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE SHOW CIRCUITS**

Children and adolescents build self-concept and self-esteem through their interactions with their peers. It is in such groups that they grow to see themselves as others have come to see them. The show children are in a distinctive situation, in that they are less able than most Australian children consistently to test out their self-images against the feedback that they receive from 'mainstream' groups. The show children's self-images are largely filtered through their itinerant lifestyle on the show circuits, including such elements as the family business, the extended family and peer relations associated with the show. Interviews with the children indicate that they have generally positive self-esteem and are largely comfortable with their own identities and the identities of their families and friends. This tendency to feel safe and comfortable increases the likelihood that the show children will engage in 'boundary maintenance', because there is less need for them to cross the boundaries into territory that is different both physically and psychologically.

The difficulties of promoting 'border crossing' by show children are revealed in their dealings with local children during the time that they are at a particular town along the show circuits. Several show children reported their sense of irritation that local children often asked them for free tickets for rides at the show. As the show children became older, they generally grew in their philosophical acceptance of these requests, and in their maturity in dealing with the requests. On the other hand, the preparedness to play social games with local children tended to reduce as the show children grew older, with most show children preferring to play with one another than to interact with locals. An extreme justification of this attitude was contained in the statement, 'I play with show kids, not with mugs'. The term 'mugs' refers to local people who have to pay money for their entertainment at the show, unlike the show people for whom such entertainment is free of charge. Here 'mugs' functions as a means of

distancing show children from local children, the likely outcome of the 'boundary maintenance' described here.

This raises an explicit attempt at 'border crossing' by several schools along the Queensland show circuits. Use is made of a 'buddy system', whereby individual local children are paired with the visiting show children and are given responsibility for easing their path through the school while the show is in town. Despite the good intentions of this initiative, it is largely unsuccessful with the show children. Many older show children in particular actively resent and resist any attempt to break down their own peer grouping, especially given that they are generally in one town for less than a week.

It is instructive to analyse the reasons for the show children's rejection of the 'buddy system' as an attempt at forced 'border crossing'. O'Brien and O'Brien (1993) argued that friends may situate themselves within what they describe as a 'community of resistance' that counters dominant social beliefs and that devalues the relationships of 'mainstream' community members. It seems that the show children's peer relationships constitute something of a 'community of resistance', in the form of resistance socialising with local children in the school or town where the show is temporarily based. If 'border crossing' is to become a recognised element of the show children's social development, educators need to locate their efforts to facilitate such a change in the show children's distinctive educational contexts, otherwise the temptation for the show children to practise 'boundary maintenance' will be too great to resist.

## **CHILDREN'S INTERACTIONS WITH TEACHERS**

The show children's interactions with their teachers provide an opportunity for either sustained 'border crossing' or continued 'boundary maintenance', according to the intentions and actions of the individuals involved in the interactions. Indeed, we contend that an important element of the distinctive professionalism of teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education is their realisation of, and responsiveness to, the particular educational contexts of their client groups, including the show children. This realisation and this responsiveness seem to be pre-requisites to the facilitation of effective 'border crossing' by both the show children and the teachers.

An issue not necessarily faced by 'mainstream' teachers is the special challenge of developing a rapport with the show children. The pattern of contact on the show circuits is such that the teachers need to inspire the children's trust and confidence in a series of relatively brief but very intensive face-to-face visits, and they need to consolidate those feelings of trust and confidence when they return to Brisbane, by means of telephone conversations with the children and their parents, and supportive and constructive comments on the children's completed correspondence papers.

One teacher, reflecting on the importance of her interactions with her students, summarised the manifold tasks that she set herself during the face-to-face encounters on the show circuits.

Now is the time you have to build up a relationship with the children if you don't know them, and their parents. You also have to look at their learning styles, what particular learning style is best for them, how they're operating with the materials, how their parents are operating with the materials.

The relevance of this teacher's statement to the concerns of this paper lies in her recognition that the educational contexts of the show children - including both 'their learning styles' and 'how their parents are operating with the materials' - have a crucial impact on the effectiveness of the education program for the show children. Thus the face-to-face contact forms an essential part of the overall set of interactions between children and teachers, by providing both groups with direct knowledge of each other that would otherwise not be available to them. It follows that this face-to-face contact is also essential for building up the rapport and trust on which 'border crossing' - the deliberate movement into the other group's spatial and cultural territory - is predicated.

## **TEACHERS' INTERACTIONS WITH PARENTS AND HOME TUTORS**

Given our earlier assertion of the close links between the show children and their families, it follows that for 'border crossing' rather than 'boundary maintenance' to occur teachers need to have harmonious and knowledgeable interactions with the children's parents and home tutors as well as with the children. These interactions are concentrated in the teachers' efforts to support the parents and home tutors in their supervision of the children's completion of the correspondence papers. These efforts involve several interrelated aspects, all of which underline the need for sensitivity to the educational contexts in which the teachers, parents and home tutors discharge their responsibilities.

On the one hand, the teacher has to share her expertise with a pedagogical intermediary. This means that the teacher has to be able to communicate clearly and succinctly to the parent or home tutor the importance of particular curriculum elements in the children's distance education papers. These curriculum elements include how the papers are organised and taught, which parts need to be emphasised, and the kind of feedback about the children's learning that will be most helpful. Again the importance of the teacher understanding the distinctive educational contexts of the show children's itinerant lifestyle - in this case, the crucial role of the people providing learning support when the teacher is in Brisbane - is emphasised. This is an important element of the teacher's 'border crossing' into the show people's territory.

On the other hand, the teacher has to work at developing the trust of the parent or home tutor just as much as she or he develops the children's trust, so that the parent or home tutor will feel sufficiently confident and secure to talk freely with the teacher about areas of uncertainty where additional assistance from the teacher would be appropriate. This in turn has the effect of helping the people providing learning support to the show children to understand in greater detail and depth the working lives of the teachers, and thereby to engage in some kind of 'border crossing' into the teachers' territory.

This analysis should not suggest that we underestimate the barriers to effective 'border crossing' by the teachers on the one hand and the parents and home tutors on the other hand. On the contrary, the fact that the educational contexts, knowledge of which is essential to the promotion of 'border crossing', are so complex and subtle suggests that long periods of familiarisation are necessary if the appropriate levels of rapport and trust between the two groups are to be generated. This is precisely why attempts to develop 'buddy systems' for less than a week's duration are likely to fail. By contrast, understanding and valuing the opportunities and constraints within which the other group works requires ongoing attention and commitment if 'border crossing' rather than 'boundary maintenance' is to take place.

## CONCLUSION

In 1987 Duffy noted:

The complexity of the many issues associated with mobility, and the very uncertainty of its real magnitude and extent throughout the school-age population, pose difficulties in interpretation of the available research findings. No clear picture of the problems of mobility and methods of coping with them emerges from the literature... (Duffy, 1987, p. 544).

We aim in this paper to have redressed this imbalance somewhat. In particular, we hope to have delineated the important connections between the Queensland show children's itinerancy and Shulman's (1987) emphasis on 'knowledge of educational contexts' as a key category of the teacher knowledge base. From this perspective, 'the problems of mobility' become a primary dimension of the show children's lifestyle and cultural heritage, a dimension that needs to be recognised and celebrated rather than labelled as inherent 'problems'. Similarly, 'methods of coping' with 'the problems of mobility' become efforts to facilitate effective 'border crossing' (Giroux, 1990) by show children and their teachers alike, thereby resisting the potential tendencies of their respective organisations to engage in 'boundary maintenance' (Barth, 1969).

Expressing this argument another way, the show children's educational contexts contain disparate elements, aggregated around their itinerancy, which can promote understanding between show people and educational providers if those elements are acknowledged and valued. The three sets of interactions outlined in this paper illustrate different ways in which these disparate elements contribute to the interplay between 'border crossing' and 'boundary maintenance'. These interactions are further examples of the show children's distinctive educational contexts, and as such they add a further level of complexity and substance to the knowledge base of Queensland teachers.

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## ENDNOTES

1. For more detailed information about the program and the authors' associated research project, see Danaher (1994, 1995, 1997a, 1997b), Danaher, Rose and Hallinan (1994), Rose, Moriarty and Danaher (1995), and Thompson and Danaher (1994).
2. Danaher and Wyer (1997) have applied the notion of 'border crossing' to current debates about globalisation; here the concept is used to analyse three sets of interactions involving the show people and the teachers.

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