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**“We’d better hide those tats”:
A transient family tries to fit in to school**

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Abstract

As the two main settings and experiences of contemporary children's lives, home and school have been foregrounded for their role in constructing and shaping the current parameters of childhood (Edwards, 2002). Research has often focussed on the constraining nature of school-based discourses on family practices. By foregrounding school-based literacy practices to the detriment of others, the institution of schooling risks marginalising students and their families and constraining their potential levels of participation. However, little work has been done on the explicit moves that some families make to limit the institutional gaze directed towards their children. To redress this issue, this paper considers the efforts of one itinerant family, who make deliberate attempts to bridge the gap between home and school, by masking some of their home practices.

Introduction

School and home – taken here to be synonymous with families, parents and familial practices – are both regarded as important in the construction and shaping of childhood (Edwards, 2002). Collaboration and “good” relations between school and home are accepted as beneficial to schooling and are promoted at all levels of Australian education, from the National Goals for Schooling (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999) to education systems (e.g. Department of Education, Queensland, 1997-2003) and schools. Whilst school personnel often rely on parents, particularly mothers, to support school processes (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Smith, 1998), it appears that the favouring of particular social practices, including literacy practices, can be to the detriment of those whose home practices do not match closely with school practices. The result can be the marginalisation, and even blaming, of families whose social practices lie outside the established white middle-class norms that are usually upheld by schools (Freebody, Ludwig, & Gunn, 1995; Heath, 1983; Henderson, 2002).

Schools valorise and privilege particular literacy practices and children’s take-up of those practices is contingent upon the social, cultural and linguistic capital that they bring to school (Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivilland, & Reid, 1998; Luke, 1994; Rohl & Rivilland, 2002). Teachers, however, not only theorise variations in student achievement using critical understandings of literacy as a social practice, but also draw on older discursive positions, including traditional skills and progressivist child-centred understandings about literacy and literacy learning (Henderson, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997). Although these more traditional views of literacy can be conceptualised in a range of different ways, their focus is

generally on psychological, cognitive and social differences among students, thereby identifying literacy success and failure as located in individual children or in children's home backgrounds (Henderson, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997). This linking of home factors with school achievement tends to foreground particular assumptions about parents – for example, that only some parents are interested in their children's education, or that middle-class parents make better parents than those with lower socio-economic status (Cairney & Munsie, 1992). Such views lead easily to deficit discourses, with failure to learn literacy identified as either an individual intellectual deficit or a social deficiency. It becomes easy, therefore, to blame children or their parents for learning problems, knowledge gaps or impoverished home or social backgrounds (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Henderson, 2002).

Such views put homes and families under an institutional gaze. Much has been written about the deficit discourses which circulate in schools and communities (e.g. Comber, Freebody et al., 1995; Hatton, Munns, & Nicklin Dent, 1996; Nicklin Dent & Hatton, 1996; Tancock, 1997) and about programs that are focused on modifying or enhancing parental behaviours (e.g. Cairney & Munsie, 1992; Hannon, 1995). However, little research has focused on the explicit moves made by families to limit such institutional scrutiny. In attempting to redress this, the current paper investigates one family's attempts to prevent institutional examination of their lives. The case study family was one of many itinerant farm worker families who move from place to place, following winter and summer harvesting seasons in eastern Australia. The members of the family attempted to "fit in" with a particular school and a particular town community, by trying to minimise the effects of being new and different, and by ensuring that some family practices were invisible to all but themselves.

Itinerant farm workers families, like other itinerant groups of people, move into communities as temporary residents and, because they do not engage in a normative residential-stability, are often positioned as "outsiders" and marginalised by the communities in which they work (Henderson, in press). As Moriarty and Danaher (1998) pointed out,

People whose homes move with them differ from the "norm" of fixed residence. They are perceived as, at best, a minority group and, at worst, marginalised from the physical, intellectual and spiritual resources available to the less transient populace. The stereotyped images conjured up by terms such as "gipsy," "nomad" and "traveller" are vivid and exotic, and more often than not pejorative. (This is even more true of descriptors such as "hobo" and "tramp.") (Moriarty & Danaher, 1998, p.7)

This paper, then, considers the ways that the case study family attempted to mitigate the effects of being "outsiders" in a North Queensland rural community. It begins by providing details of the study, discussing the community and school contexts into which the family moved, and examining some of the family's actions in attempting to "fit in".

The study

This study focuses on one New Zealand family, who had come to Australia to build a more financially-secure future for themselves. Dave and Lisa Neilsen planned to spend three years working winter harvesting seasons in a vegetable-growing area of North Queensland and summer seasons in a New South Wales apple-growing area before returning to New Zealand. On their arrival in North Queensland in May 2000, their ten-year-old son Ryan enrolled in Year 4 in the Queensland schooling system. Towards the end of that year, he travelled south with his parents and enrolled at a school in New South Wales. He returned to the North

Queensland school for approximately six months of Year 5, before travelling south again. Although the Neilsens had been fruit pickers in New Zealand, they had lived and worked in one town. Being itinerant and changing residences, schools and education systems, therefore, were new experiences.

In collecting data as part of a larger study of itinerant farm workers' children, I interviewed the Nielsen family on numerous occasions during the winter harvesting seasons of 2000 and 2001. I also interviewed school personnel and community members and observed itinerant children in classrooms and in the playground of the North Queensland school that Ryan attended. The data has been read through a socially critical lens, highlighting the family's perspectives and examining the ways that the family positioned itself in a community that tended to construct farm workers as untrustworthy citizens.

Moving into new contexts

The school context

In North Queensland, Ryan attended a primary school that experienced fluctuating enrolments in line with the local harvesting season. At the beginning of each year, the school had approximately 530 students, but the arrival of the children of itinerant farm workers swelled numbers to approximately 580. In general, school personnel regarded the arrival of itinerant farm workers' children as having a negative effect on the school. They equated increased enrolments with larger class sizes, increased workloads, the need for an additional teacher to be appointed and the consequent rearrangement of students into classes (Henderson, in press), as well as with increased numbers of social and behavioural problems (Henderson, 2001).

During the time that I collected data, it became apparent that the residentially-stable children, who attended the school all year round, were seen as the "norm" and the itinerant children were judged in relation to them. As far as many of the teachers were concerned, the lifestyles of itinerant families were responsible for the middle to low academic achievement levels of the children, an apparent lack of resources in their "homes", and parents' presumed disinterest in education. At one stage in Year 5, when Ryan was experiencing a number of difficulties at school, particularly in relation to his classroom behaviour, his teacher provided an explanation of the perceived relationship between Ryan's behaviour and his father's occupation:

Judging by the rule of thumb, I wouldn't be surprised if Ryan's dad just wants to have a few beers and relax when he's not working and he might work ten or twelve hour days. So in terms of me saying to him, "Hey Ryan is going to do better in school if you're involved and reading with him and saying how's your schooling," that will go by the wind, because he'll never get a chance. He's going to walk in the door at six, covered in dirt, with a very dry throat and need a hot shower and a couple of hours on his own at night. He's not going to be talking to Ryan, not shepherding Ryan, not guiding Ryan. And some of those guys work seven days a week. That's where we'd see a difference in Ryan, I think. If Ryan was Ryan and he didn't have itinerant parents or if he didn't have parents that were working that long, then you might be able to say, "Hey, come up and let's get Ryan going."

The teacher's constructions of Ryan's home life described busy and tired farm worker parents who would not have the time to spend with their son or to talk with him about school. He implied that Ryan's parents were deficient in relation to parenting and would be too tired to provide what he regarded as appropriate support. His comments, however, were not specific

to Ryan's family as, in another interview, he linked what he perceived as the deterioration of his class's behaviour to the arrival of itinerant farm workers' children. Good behaviour was contrasted with bad and the period when no itinerant children were enrolled was contrasted with the presence of itinerant children in the school. For the teacher, the evidence for these binaries was convincing, and he concluded that itinerant parents, who worked long hours and, in his opinion, did not look after their children, were to blame for the difficulties in his classroom.

At the whole school level, there was agreement amongst school personnel that student behaviour declined when itinerant children were enrolled. Comments by the principal at a Parents' and Citizens' Association meeting identified behaviour problems as increasing as the year (and the harvesting season) progressed. He explained that, at the beginning of the year prior to the enrolment of itinerant children, there usually had been only one child per day in the school's withdrawal room, whereas that number had increased to eight or ten a day during the harvesting season.

School personnel also explained that they rarely saw the itinerant farm worker parents at the school, except when they enrolled their children. Although school personnel were not surprised by this, because farm workers generally worked from dawn to around mid-afternoon, they seemed to expect that farm workers should modify their behaviours to "fit" the school's expectations of parents. As demonstrated by the excerpt from the school's *Prospectus*, shown in Figure 1, the school promoted education as a partnership between parents, teachers and children, making explicit links between "good" home-school relations and children's learning. This document attributes better results and fast and effective learning to parental involvement in education. However, as Cairney and Munsie (1992) pointed out, schools and teachers sometimes draw on very narrow definitions of parent involvement in schooling, definitions which are based on what parents or communities can "do" for teachers or how schools can make parents "better" at their roles in the home.

INSERT FIGURE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

In the case of the Neilsens, teachers appeared to believe that parental support for education was not forthcoming. As will be shown later in this paper, Ryan's parents supported Ryan's education in ways that were invisible to school personnel.

The community context and its stories

In moving into the rural community in North Queensland, the family were faced by a plethora of deficit stories about itinerant farm workers. The dominant stories that circulated in the community, and were supported by consistent messages in the town's newspaper, identified farm workers negatively and suggested that they were untrustworthy, more interested in partying than in being good citizens, and linked to crime and illegal immigration. Farm workers with children were often described as bad parents. Although many of the stories appeared to be generalisations that had originated from one or two incidents, these stories circulated as commonsense understandings in the community. Some of the stories also seemed to reflect wider societal stories about families in poverty, as identified by a growing body of research (e.g. Comber, 1998; Freebody et al., 1995) and ongoing national media coverage of "illegal" immigration. In discussing the latter, Clyne (2002) identified "the discourse of hatred, dehumanisation and demonisation" (p.10) that has dominated the media across Australia in recent years. Such issues have resurfaced in recent weeks (e.g. Lewis & Walters, 2003; Morris, 2003). It is not surprising, therefore, that the stories circulating in the

rural town where the Neilsens worked constituted farm workers as a threat to permanent residents. To exacerbate matters, farm workers' bodies were "marked" as different from other community members – by the sweat, dust and green stain from picking tomatoes – making them a visible and easily-recognisable group in the community (Davies & Hunt, 2000).

The Neilsens had personal experience of what they regarded as discrimination against itinerant farm workers. They discussed their first attempt at renting accommodation at one of the town's real estate agencies.

Dave: I think coming to town and then saying that you're going to be a picker, straight away you're on the bottom of the list. You know, they don't look at you as a real client. You're a picker . . . The first real estate agent that we dealt with here in town

Lisa: They were rude.

Dave: They showed us, we came and looked at a flat down there, number 4, and we looked at the flat. It was okay and we said, okay we'll take it.

Lisa: Signed it all up.

Dave: Signed it all up and then they said, oh no, someone has rung and they wanted it. There was some reason, wasn't there?

Lisa: It was bullshit though.

Dave: And we went to the other one [real estate agent] and they showed us this one, so we moved in here and that one stayed empty for about three weeks. They had people coming and looking at it and we found that quite funny, because we had looked at it and they turned us down, and then it was empty.

This example illustrates the way that some of the stereotypical stories, circulating in the community, were played out in everyday business practices. It seemed that stories, which were constructed around a permanent-itinerant binary and thus promoted mistrust of itinerant farm workers, were at times enacted through the non-acceptance of itinerant farm workers as customers, clients, or tenants. Some businesses, including the hotels, seemed to thrive on the additional trade that the itinerant workers brought to town, whilst others were more wary about dealing with "outsiders."

Trying to fit in

Trying to not look different

Even though Dave and Lisa Neilsen knew that they were temporary residents of the town, they wanted Ryan to be happy, both in the community and at school. To this end, they made deliberate moves to avoid behaviours that might cause community or school criticism or mistrust. One simple strategy utilised by the family was to make sure that they blended in with the "locals" whenever they could. Dave and Lisa were quite aware that itinerant seasonal farm workers were seen as "outsiders" to the local community and that the nature of their work – which demanded long hours, beginning early in the morning, and made them physically tired by the early evening – mitigated against them joining community organisations or even getting to know many local residents. They were determined, nevertheless, to avoid the stigma that seemed to be attached to their occupation.

Because farm workers could be easily recognised by the visible, body markers that came with their jobs – green tomato stains, dust, sweat, and dirty clothes – Dave and Lisa liked to shower and change clothes before going into the community. As they explained:

Dave: And you don't even like going into the shops after work, do you, with your picking clothes on?

Lisa: No.

Dave: 'Cause they know then.

It was only after I had interviewed them several times, however, that they revealed much more about their bodily appearances and offered an in-depth discussion about their decision to hide certain aspects of their familial practices from public view. In particular, they discussed their multiple body tattoos, which they argued, might have offended or upset permanent residents in the town. During interviews, they were usually dressed in shorts and tee-shirts and no tattoos were visible. The Neilsens pointed out that hiding their tattoos had not been a consideration in their home town in New Zealand, but they were of the opinion that, in the particular North Queensland context in which they were living, visible tattoos were "not always socially acceptable" and "sometimes employers won't give you a job" (Dave Neilsen, interview transcript). In discussing tattoos, the Neilsens also discussed their relationship with the school and their belief that their strategy had worked. They offered the following explanation:

Dave: It's about trying to blend in with the community and not be looked down on.

Lisa: It's quite different, isn't it? Because at home we show them. It doesn't matter. Ryan says, when I'm eighteen I'm getting a tattoo. It's normal, for him it's normal, because everyone he knows has one.

Dave: I think we've actually had quite good rapport with the school. We've been and talked to the principal a couple of times and he's seemed really pleased that we've done that. And the deputy principal too. And yesterday we went and picked Ryan up because he had earache and Ryan said to me that his teacher said, oh you're dad seems a pretty good, easy going sort of bloke, and then he rang up that night. He must have thought I seemed all right to talk to. Oh, here's a parent I can ring.

The strategies used by the Neilsens, to not look like farm workers and to hide their tattoos, recognised that people "read" the body and make assumptions about people – what they are like and what types of values they have – based on physical appearance (Braidotti, 1992; Grosz, 1990; Yaman, 2003). Whilst the concessions made by the Neilsens probably went unnoticed by the community as well as by school personnel, they demonstrated the family's attempts to diminish the effects of difference and to blend in with the local population.

Being "good" parents

Although Dave and Lisa Neilsen spoke positively about education, the type of support that they could offer to Ryan was not necessarily the same as for parents who were not working on farms. Whilst they were not able to participate in school events during the day or be involved in voluntary work in classrooms, they did attend school functions that were held at night. One such event was the school's fancy dress ball:

Dave: We don't really have much time for school here, do we? Whereas at home we were at school all the time . . .

RH: Even though you don't spend much time at school, you obviously turned up at the fancy dress ball.

Dave: Yeah, we turn up to those things. I suppose you feel, because you've moved, that you should be here and seeing what they're doing and encouraging them to mingle with other kids.

Dave and Lisa also encouraged Ryan to do well at school, arguing that they wanted him to use education as a pathway to job opportunities that did not involve manual labour. Although their support of education and their encouragement to Ryan were generally invisible to school personnel, they were adamant that they did not want Ryan following them and working as a farm labourer:

Dave: We've already suggested that he'd [Ryan] be better off owning the bloody farm than working on one. Another time he said, I want to be a truck driver. I said, don't worry about that. Keep going at school and buy a couple of trucks.

Lisa: The jobs not good for you.

Dave: Definitely not good for you. Especially here, I've not seen anything like it . . . Here you have planes [aerial sprayers] swooping over you and

Lisa: And I've had bronchitis . . . the doctor told me it was from the spray. You put your arm up at the bush like that and you've got your face in it . . .

Dave: We don't want him [Ryan] to end up doing what we're doing. That would be my biggest fear that he'd end up doing what we're bloody doing.

Ryan's time at the North Queensland school, however, was not always easy. He was often in trouble with teachers, who identified him as a difficult and challenging student. On a number of occasions, Ryan was suspended and Dave and Lisa were called into the school to meet with the principal. At no stage did they criticise or question the school's actions, even though time out of school for Ryan meant time off work for one of them and resulted in reduced income. In an interview, they expressed concern that Ryan's behaviours were a result of their decision to live a transient lifestyle and they discussed the feelings of guilt that they experienced:

Dave: Ryan has been fully settled his whole life and then suddenly he's moving every year.

Lisa: It makes me feel guilty. It does. It makes me feel guilty that

Dave: He's getting into trouble because you're moving around?

Lisa: I feel responsible. I do. I feel responsible in a way, don't you?

Dave: (*Nodded.*)

Lisa: You do.

In trying to support the school's attempts to change Ryan's behaviours, Dave and Lisa supported school decisions and attempted to modify their own behaviours in the home. Lisa enrolled in a parenting course and endeavoured to implement some of the strategies that were suggested. Her attendance at this course, however, was not evident to personnel at Ryan's school, as it was held at another school in the area. Lisa's willingness to learn about and take on some of the practices, that were recommended by those working in the schooling system, were hampered to a certain extent by the stress she experienced in attending a course in the evening. As she pointed out,

Because it's from seven to nine at night, and you know, I get up at twenty to five in the morning and by eight o'clock I'm sitting there like, and I said to the lady, look, I can't watch the video and write things as well. I said, that's just not me. I'm one thing or the other. I just go blank. I come home and do it most of the time.

Dave – despite his reservations about buying additional equipment that would have to be transported when they moved to New South Wales for the summer harvesting season – bought Ryan a computer, as he believed that was important for keeping in touch with current technological advances.

In the time I spent with the Neilsens, I began to realise that Ryan’s parents were keen for him to do well at school and supported him in ways that were often invisible to school personnel. Their lack of visibility in the school setting did not mean a lack of support.

Conclusion

This case study examined the efforts made by the members of one family of itinerant seasonal farm workers to fit into a community where they resided temporarily. In their attempts to be accepted by the community and to not look like “outsiders,” they were willing to modify practices that might have upset some of the permanent residents. Because their son was regarded as a troublemaker at school, they also tried to change some of their parenting practices and to take up some of the parenting behaviours that were recommended by members of the institution. This “work,” however, was generally not visible to members of the town and school communities.

As Gilbert (2000) pointed out, “the unevenness of schooling outcomes indicates how differently students enter into and participate in the school’s curriculum” (p.4). Indeed, schools can penalise children “because of the families or cultures or geographies they are born into” (Gilbert, 2000, p.4). What the Nielsen family showed was that some families work towards a better “fit” with schools and school practices. The challenge for schools is to use this information and to look at ways of developing productive partnerships with families who traditionally have been seen as unsupportive of schooling.

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At our school we believe that:-

- education is a partnership between the parents, the teachers and the children.
- when parents show interest in their children's education and are supportive of the school, their children do better.
- parents should be given the opportunity to increase their understanding of the new curricula and teaching methods and their involvement in schools.
- when parents value education, they're showing their children that school is important.
- communication links with parents and the community are established and maintained effectively.

LEARNING TAKES PLACE
MORE QUICKLY AND EFFECTIVELY
WHEN HOME AND SCHOOL
ARE IN HARMONY.

Figure 1. An excerpt from the school's *Prospectus*.