**HIR 03304**

# Opening Pandora’s Box: Ethical dilemmas in literacy research

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## Abstract

*In recognising literacy as a social practice, some educational research has investigated the nexus between school and home or community literacy practices. In doing this, however, researchers sometimes find themselves opening a Pandora’s Box, where the expected jewels of wisdom have been replaced by unexpected ethical dilemmas.*

*This paper presents some of the dilemmas experienced by one researcher in interviewing teachers, students and parents from one school site over a two-year period. Whilst some of the ethical dilemmas were to do with confidentiality and the wellbeing of participants, others revealed quite complex issues that needed consideration. In particular, the paper focuses on the issue of researcher responsibility to participants, schools and academic audiences, as well as how to best balance deconstructive and reconstructive notions of critique.*

**Considering Pandora's Box**

Doing research is said to always involve risks and ethical considerations (Burns, 2000). University-based researchers, of course, are obliged to follow their institutions' guidelines for conducting ethical research and thus guarantee participants' welfare and rights, confidentiality, safe data storage, and "good, desirable and acceptable conduct" of researchers (National Health and Medical Research Council, 1999, cited in James Cook University, 2003). Furthermore, educational researchers, especially those working in schools, have to be cognizant of the ethics of working with children. In Queensland, the importance of protecting children's information and ensuring that they do not come to any harm during research has been given high priority by the state educational authority (see Department of Education (Queensland), 2003), in conjunction with the Commission for Children and Young People (see Commission for Children and Young People, 2000-2003).

These proactive procedures for preventing and minimising ethical difficulties can give the impression that research processes will operate smoothly and unproblematically in a "neat, packaged, unilinear" fashion (Punch, 1998, p.159). However, this is not always the case, particularly for researchers drawing on qualitative and ethnographic traditions, which so often rely on the data collection methods of participant observation and interviewing. As Punch (1998) argued, researchers need to recognise

> the political perils and ethical pitfalls of actually carrying out research . . . fieldwork is definitely not a soft option, but, rather, represents a *demanding* craft that involves both coping with multiple negotiations and continually dealing with ethical dilemmas. (Punch, 1998, p.159)

Although such conclusions may be painfully obvious to experienced researchers, this is not always the case for neophyte researchers. As an enthusiastic doctoral candidate, I was hopeful that my research would be a Pandora's Box, that would open to reveal a treasure chest gleaming with the jewels of research understandings – new insights and opportunities for further research – and the pearls of ethical wisdom – confidentiality, anonymity, participant safety and ethical researcher behaviours. I discovered, however, that my research was a Pandora's Box containing a range of ethical dilemmas.

This paper addresses some of the dilemmas I experienced in interviewing teachers, students and families from one school site over a two-year period. Whilst some of these dilemmas were related to confidentiality and the wellbeing of participants, others revealed far more complex issues that needed consideration. In particular, I explore the issue of researcher responsibility to participants, schools and academic audiences, as well as how to best balance deconstructive and reconstructive notions of critique.

***Making sense of ethical considerations***

The ethical guidelines of universities (e.g. James Cook University, 2003) and education systems (e.g. Department of Education (Queensland), 2003) tend to focus on issues of privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, data management and participant wellbeing. Whilst these guidelines sometimes imply that ethical

considerations are easily managed, research "textbooks" often highlight the complexities and dilemmas that researchers may face (e.g. see Patton, 2002; Peace, 1993; Sieber, 1993). In the case of interpretive qualitative research and some of the techniques that are associated with it – including participant observations, emic perspectives and thick descriptions – ethical issues may be quite complex and may appear at any part of the research process (Bailey, 1996; Howe & Moses, 1999; Patton, 2002). According to Punch (1998), qualitative research involves "fundamental dilemmas" in relation to practical, ethical, professional and legal issues (p.167). The extent to which a piece of research is sensitive or innocuous, however, cannot always be determined in advance, as the "sensitive nature" of research may not emerge until research practices are underway (Bailey, 1996; Lee & Renzetti, 1993). As Lee and Renzetti (1993) pointed out,

> The sensitive character of a piece of research seemingly inheres less in the topic itself and more in the relationship between that topic and the social context within which the research is conducted. It is not uncommon, for example, for a researcher to approach a topic with caution on the assumption that it is a sensitive one, only to find that those initial fears had been misplaced. Neither is it unusual for the sensitive nature of an apparently innocuous topic to become manifest once research is under way. (Lee & Renzetti, 1993, p.5)

Although proactive attempts to think about and plan for potential risks or dangers are essential, researchers need to be aware that risks and dilemmas may not be immediately obvious or predictable in advance. Patton (2002) advises researchers to "Be careful. It's dangerous out there" (p.415). Whilst Punch (1998) recognises that "no one in his or her right mind would support a carefree, amateuristic, and unduly naïve approach," he also warns against "leaning too far toward a highly restrictive model" (p.157). His advice is for researchers to "get out and do it" (p.157), but he adds the proviso that

> you should stop and reflect on the political and ethical dimensions of what you are about to experience. Just do it by all means, but think a bit first. (Punch, 1998, p.180)

It seems, however, that particular types of research foreground particular types of ethical issues (Howe & Moses, 1999). In interpretive qualitative research, issues of confidentiality, privacy and participant wellbeing – the foci of the institutional documents mentioned above – are particularly significant. Although a number of techniques, such as the use of pseudonyms, are generally employed to protect those involved, such practices are not always failsafe. Breaches of confidentiality, according to Howe and Moses (1999), "are not generally a problem unless a negative picture is painted by a report of a community or some of its members (p.45). Although Howe and Moses suggest that such difficulties may be remedied through the involvement of participants in dialogue about research findings or the contents of research reports, they recognise that "this is only a partial remedy and will work only sometimes" (p.45). They raise the particularly difficult issue of how to proceed when "a negative picture might be called for" (p.45):

> For instance, suppose a community (or school) and its leaders can be characterized as profoundly racist and sexist. Shouldn't such findings be reported in the interests of those who are being oppressed, at the site in question and elsewhere? (Howe & Moses, 1999, p.45)

Whilst Howe and Moses (1999) suggest that researchers need to be "extremely careful and deliberate" about making judgements (p.45), other researchers take the view that research is meant to be transformative. Tierney (1994), for example, argued that "we do not merely analyse or study an object to gain greater understanding, but instead struggle to investigate how individuals and groups might be better able to change their situations" (p.99). However, it may be difficult to know how to "construct stories that satisfy the multiple audiences for which the research is intended, while remaining true to one's own beliefs about research" (Ropers-Huilman, 1999, p.21).

As Comber (1996) pointed out, critical educators and researchers risk seeing teachers and their work as "sites for critique" (p.19). She argued that

> Critical research concerned with literacy teaching has most often taken an advocacy role in relation to the child or the student. In other words researchers have considered the social effects of particular kinds of literacy instruction from children's standpoints. Calls for change for different kinds of practices are then seen as the teacher's problem, without recognising teachers' own standpoints, histories and institutional locations. (Comber, 1996, p.19)

Although deconstructive notions of critique are often balanced with reminders about multiple readings and the impossibility of "objectively describing any given reality" (Tierney, 1994, p.98), tensions may exist over challenges to the ways things are "done" in schools and perceived criticism of teachers. Tierney (1994) argued that researchers should not shy away from taking explicitly political stances and should be working actively towards "challenging inequalities" (p.111). According to Ropers-Huilman (1999), researchers who want to work towards social justice have six obligations, in order to make "sound research choices within the competing demands, struggles, and uncertainties of inquiry" and to position themselves within possibilities for "renewal and change" (p.34). The obligations are:

- to recognise that research involves active, yet partial, meaning-making,
- to recognise that research will change others,
- to be open to change,
- to tell others about experiences and perspectives,
- to explore multiple meanings of equity and care, and
- to promote understandings of equity and care. (Ropers-Huilman, 1999)

Whilst such issues are often considered and played out in local sites, Luke (2002) argued for a consideration of ethical and political issues within broader global contexts. He commented on the way that educational researchers often engage in anti-normalising social critique, but avoid getting their "hands dirty with the sticky matter of what educationally is to be done" (p.54). He argues instead for "an ethical and political metanarrative," that offers "a powerful, shared normative vision of what education can and should be" (pp.49, 53).

### *Contextualising the issues*

The issues discussed in this paper come from a study into the literacy learning of the children of itinerant seasonal farm workers, who work the winter harvesting seasons in North Queensland, Australia, and the summer harvesting season in the southern states of New South Wales or Victoria. At the school site of the study, between forty and sixty itinerant farm workers' children enrol each year and spend between one and six months at the school. The farm workers' children are a diverse group, both ethnically – as they include Tongan, Samoan, Maori, Turkish, Vietnamese and Anglo students – and in relation to their experiences of an itinerant lifestyle. Some have parents who are second and third generation fruit pickers and have been itinerant since they were born, whilst others come from families who are trying an itinerant lifestyle for the first time. Changing schools is a new experience for some of the children, but not for others.

I interviewed six families – parents and children – on many occasions during two consecutive winter harvesting seasons. I also observed itinerant children in classrooms and in the playground and interviewed school personnel, including classroom teachers, specialist teachers and members of the administrative team, and community members. I was particularly interested in the stories told by teachers, parents and children in their construction of itinerant farm workers' children as literacy learners.

## Opening Pandora's Box

It was during data collection that a range of ethical dilemmas began to surface and it became apparent that I needed to consider the implications of analysing, using and publishing particular pieces of data. Initially, I reconsidered issues of confidentiality and anonymity in relation to the case study families. However, as I began to analyse more of the data, I realised that my use of polyvocality – in incorporating teachers', children's and parents' voices – had the potential to pit one group of participants against another. This required me to think about how I was going to present the diverse viewpoints that appeared and to consider my position in relation to those.

### *Confidentiality and anonymity*

Although confidentiality and anonymity had been guaranteed to all participants, it became clear that this was not possible within the school community where the data was collected. I had particularly wanted to consider teachers' voices alongside those of parents and children. However, for school personnel, including teachers, administrators and teacher aides, it appeared that it would be fairly easy to identify particular children, their families and their teachers. For example, of the school population of between 560 and 580 students, 40 and 59 itinerant farm workers' children enrolled in 2000 and 2001 respectively. In talking about itinerant farm workers' children in terms of ethnicity, which appeared to play a significant role in the way the children were constructed by teachers as literacy learners, the field was narrowed even further. As illustrated by Table 1, the students' ethnic backgrounds made identification a fairly easy task. Although the use of pseudonyms provided protection against identification of the location and participants by those outside of the research, it did not ensure that one participant could not identify another.

**Table 1. Family backgrounds of the total enrolment of itinerant farm workers' children and the case study families.**

| Family background | Total enrolment of itinerant farm workers' children | | Children from case study families | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2000 | 2001 | 2000 | 2001 |
| Anglo | 9 | 12 | 1 | 1 |
| Indigenous | 1 | 5 | | |
| Maori | 2 | 8 | | 4 |
| Samoan | 6 | 10 | | |
| Tongan | 12 | 15 | 5 | 5 |
| Turkish | 9 | 6 | 3 | 2 |
| Vietnamese | 1 | 3 | | |
| TOTAL | 40 | 59 | 9 | 12 |

This was particularly so when specific information about the case study families was added to the descriptions of their family backgrounds. For example, one Tongan family comprised a girl and twin boys and only one family fitted that description. Similarly, one Anglo itinerant student was regarded, by teachers, as one of the school's "behaviour problems." He too was easily identifiable, as were the teachers who taught him. I discussed these issues with families and school personnel and no one seemed to be concerned about their lack of anonymity within the research site.

However, it was specific information that some families revealed in the later stages of data collection that raised more particular ethnical issues and highlighted tensions between my ethical position as a researcher and what was useful and important to my research. These issues surfaced when case study families allowed me to be privy to insights that had not been offered to school personnel – and it seemed that the information was shared only when the participants were confident that the researcher-participant relationship had developed into one of trust and respect. My approach was to discuss each issue with the participants who provided the insights. In doing that, we shared our perspectives and considered the advantages and disadvantages of using the information in question. Some of Ropers-Huilman's (1999) obligations were in play here. I was comfortable with being guided by whether the participants thought the information could be used, whether it could be filtered in such a way as to preserve anonymity, or whether it should not be used at all. The wellbeing of participants, in present and future situations, was at stake here.

In some situations, families decided that they were comfortable for information to be shared with others. For example, one family, who had showed me their tattoos, talked at length about the way that people "read" tattoos and make assumptions about those who have them. In discussing their reasons for keeping their tattoos hidden, they provided useful material for my research. Their decision was a deliberate move to not advertising familial practices that might have upset some of the permanent residents of the community and exemplified their attempts to "fit in." The dilemma for me, however, was that I recognised that, by writing about their tattoos, I would reveal their existence. On that occasion, the family decided that I could use the information and suggested that it might help teachers to understand the efforts they were making.

As one of the parents explained, "It's about trying to blend in with the community and not be looked down on."

In other situations, I had to filter information. One family, for example, openly discussed information that lay on the interface between legal and illegal activity. Initially, I was told by one of the eleven-year children that, "This year I didn't go to school for six months," a statement that was accompanied by talk about the difficulties of "not knowing half of the work that I've missed." Although the student was happy for me to talk further about this with the family, the student thought that school personnel would "probably freak" if they found out. In subsequent discussions with the student's parents, I was given insight into the reasons that had underpinned their decision to allow their child to work instead of going to school. Although they recognised that they had contravened the law – "We know that it is wrong" – they believed it was the only option that allowed them to provide the support required by a sick member of their family and to also meet their financial commitments.

However, whilst they were comfortable with discussing that information with me – and, in my initial meeting with the family, I had given assurances that their information was confidential – they were concerned about repercussions from the school. With their permission, I filtered the information, using non-gendered descriptors and broad statements regarding family relationships. In this way, I was able to use the information, but ensured that the student could not be identified as belonging to a particular case study family. Even though the parents were more than happy for the student to be linked to the family once the students' transition from primary to high school had taken place, I do not plan to do this.

***Polyvocal dissonance***

The second ethical dilemma concerned the use of polyvocality. In using the voices of teachers, children and parents, I planned to offer the perspectives of all three groups about itinerancy and its relationship to literacy learning. What I quickly discovered was that the placement of some data alongside other data was likely to reflect badly on some participants, particularly teachers. There were times when teachers' assumptions about families were based on flimsy evidence or were generalisations of a single incident, at times even seeming to be conjecture. For example, some teachers blamed families for the problems the children were experiencing at school, as is evident in the following interview excerpt:

> As soon as they start work they will have very little time to spend with him, to talk about the things he's got to deal with at school, his angst or anger or confusion or emotions, because they're going to be busy working, and when they're not working I guess they'll be stuffed. Judging by the rule of thumb, I wouldn't be surprised if [the 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 [your son] is going to do better in school if you're involved, and reading with him and saying how's your schooling," that will just go with 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 [his son], not shepherding him, not guiding him. And some of those guys work seven days a week. That's where we'd see a difference in [the student],

> I think. If . . . 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 him going."

Teachers' stories that suggested that itinerant parents had chosen lifestyle over the well-being of their children were prevalent. However, interviews with the parents indicated that families were working extremely hard to provide for their children, to balance their itinerant lifestyle with their children's educations, and trying to fit into the community. Some parents explained that their decisions were not always guilt free, as in the following interview excerpt:

> Father: [Our son] has been fully settled his whole life and then suddenly he's moving every year.
> Mother: It makes me feel guilty. It does. It makes me feel guilty that
> Father: He's getting into trouble because you're moving around?
> Mother: I feel responsible. I do. I feel responsible in a way, don't you?
> Father: (*Nodded.*)
> Mother: You do.

Sometimes teachers' descriptions of specific children were so contradictory that it seemed as though they could not have been talking about the same children. As the following excerpts from interview transcripts illustrate, two teachers "read" one child very differently:

> … was a delightful boy. I really miss him. He was top of the Grade 4s [in my class]. His English was very good. A couple of little idiomatic things that he said incorrectly, but his reading, oral reading was excellent, comprehension was excellent.

> … was pretty good at articulation, so he was a talker and good at expressing ideas and his handwriting was good and his spelling was good. The only thing I've got him down low here was his reading. I don't think his reading was all that flash.

The dilemma here is that the use of such data has the potential to set one piece in opposition to another or one research participant in opposition to another participant – parent against teacher or teacher against teacher. Whilst a text, such as the data and analysis presented in my thesis or a in journal article, is "a construction of multiple constituencies – subject, researcher, narrator, author, and, ultimately, reader" (Tierney, 1994, p.106), I am responsible for the (re)construction of "reality" that I present – and therein lie numerous ethical dilemmas. Should I privilege one story over another? Should I advocate on behalf of one group? How can I be responsible to multiple audiences – to the families who opened up their lives to scrutiny, and to school personnel who opened up their practices and classrooms to inspection (and are hoping that my research might provide arguments and evidence for increased systemic support for schools who enrol large numbers of itinerant children), as well as to academic audiences?

In this study, I was probably fortunate that I did not set out to evaluate school practices, but was interested in examining the construction of itinerant farm workers' children as literacy learners. In doing this, I could explore the ways that particular stories and views were constructed within particular contexts and examine which discourses could be accessed or not accessed within those contexts. I was also able to move beyond the school context and investigate the stories that circulated in the wider community of the town. These illustrated the way that "school" stories reflected wider community beliefs, thus helping to allay any fears that I was merely shifting blame from families to teachers. Like Comber (1996), I wanted to "construct meanings in ways that do justice to the complexity of teachers' work and the competing and contradictory discourses and institutional requirements that construct that work" (pp.16-17). In this way, I could show how commonsense assumptions were taken up, with the families' stories providing alternative perspectives that were not always readily available to teachers in schools. As Tierney (1994) pointed out, one role of the researcher is "to paint portraits of possibilities" (p.112) and, although ethical considerations will always be involved, it is difficult to envision reconstructive notions of critique without having some idea of what is possible.

**Reconsidering Pandora's Box**

Ethical issues, then, became part of core decisions about how to present the data that I had collected. Questions of participant wellbeing and confidentiality were discussed with the participants who were involved and they made the final decision about whether the data was used or not. Ethical issues relating to the polyvocality of the data, however, were more complex and required ongoing consideration. I would like to think that I have helped to present perspectives and stories that are not always available to teachers in schools and that these will facilitate talk about alternative ways of making sense of itinerant farm workers' children as literacy learners. As far as Pandora's Box is concerned, I have come to the conclusion that complacency is not an option and that ethical issues have to be considered as they emerge.

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