

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM AND THE QUESTIONS

“Questions are invented, like anything else. If you aren’t allowed to invent your questions, with elements from all over the place, from never mind where, if people ‘pose’ them to you, you haven’t much to say. The art of constructing a problem is very important; you invent a problem, a problem-position, before finding a solution.”

Deleuze, 1987; cited in Buchanan, 1996c, p. 99

“He came to the point. He remarked that in his job, the problem isn’t really finding the answers. It’s finding the questions. ‘We need the man who can find the key questions.’ ”

Lynn & Jay, 1986, p. 14

1.1 The problem

This thesis is concerned with marginalisation, and with the possibilities of resistance and transformation of that marginalisation, in the lives of the children of itinerant show families whose travels take them through coastal and western Queensland. More specifically, the problem with which the thesis engages is the ways in which educational provision for these children has been complicit with that marginalisation as well as being the site of alternative understandings about how Travellers can and should be educated. (Throughout the thesis, I use the British term ‘Traveller education’ – including the capital ‘T’ to reflect respect for the self-asserted ethnicity of many itinerant groups – to denote educational provision for occupational Travellers such as show children, and I use ‘itinerancy’ to refer to the set of conditions involved in occupational travelling.)

The statement of this problem establishes the parameters for this thesis. The focus is clearly on the show children and their families, as a specialised group whose educational needs depart from the ‘norm’ of children living in permanent residences and attending their local schools. The show children’s home tutors, and the teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education, are important, but here their roles are analysed from the standpoint of how they contribute to the show children’s educational experiences.

The statement of the problem also signals my interest in the recipients’ consumption of an educational policy as opposed to the designers’ development of such a policy. As I explain at length in Chapter Three, the conceptual framework guiding this study has been selected for its utility in explaining

how the show people used their consumption of the education program designed for their children to subvert their marginalised status, and in the process to capitalise on educational providers' outsideness that promotes greater mutual and creative understanding of the other group's circumstances. This approach reflects my continuing interest in the actions of minority groups as exercises of social agency (Giddens, 1984) in educational contexts.

In view of the problem to be addressed in this thesis, the following concepts have been assigned prominence in the study:

- marginalisation
- resistance
- transformation.

These concepts underpin the research questions of the study and provide the framework for the analysis of data in the substantive part of the thesis. The concepts are linked logically and sequentially. The show people's marginalised status (and its educational consequences) provide both a backdrop and an impetus for their resistance of that status, which in turn creates the possibilities of counternarratives, or 'alternative stories', about the show people's lives and educational opportunities. The intention is to emphasise marginalisation, resistance and transformation **as** shifting and fluid markers of the dynamic relations between show people and educational providers, not **as** fixed receptacles for ossified interactions between 'us' and 'them'.

Martinez (1994) captured something of the spirit of this intention when she commented:

*My growing conviction ~~is~~ that **our** work on the context ~~of~~ teaching should lead us to recognise the importance ~~not of the~~ factors, aspects **or** components we identify, but ~~of~~ what goes on at the human level **as** real people interact with these factors in particular sites. The action is not in the named parts ~~of our~~ conceptual maps, but in the arrows that join them. (p. 138)*

The aim of this thesis is to analyse “*the action*” that takes part in “*the arrows*” joining the show people and the educational providers in coastal and western Queensland, particularly in reference to the key concepts of marginalisation, resistance and transformation.

1.2 The significance of the problem

The 1990s in Australia, **as** in many other developed countries, witnessed a proliferation of educational programs designed to address particular manifestations of ‘special needs’. These ‘special needs’ are generally involved in some way with particular constructions of marginalised identities: women (see for example Rowan, Bartlett & Danaher, 1996); Indigenous Australians; residents in rural communities; students with physical and intellectual disabilities; the illiterate; and the itinerant.

Of these groups, there is no doubt that itinerants have a considerably lower profile. Yet one of the most predictable questions likely to be exchanged when strangers meet is: “*Where do you live?*” – or possibly its variant: “*Where do you **come from?***” (Winning, 1990, p. 246). Establishing a new

acquaintance's physical location is "*a pervasive and effective mechanism for regulating social relations*" (Danaher, 1993, p. 71).

Permanent residence is also a means for constructing one incarnation of 'the other' – the shiftless wanderer whose address at 'no fixed abode' renders her or him at best unreliable and improvident, and at worst likely to be found in a court of law on some kind of property charge. (Danaher, 1993, p. 71)

Within the field of open and distance learning, Traveller education is further marginalised. By far the most common view sees clients of distance education programs as residing permanently in one of two sites: either on farms and properties, or else in towns and cities. The two groups are assumed to be prevented from enjoying the benefits of face-to-face teaching and learning – the first group by 'the tyranny of distance', the second by non-negotiable work commitments or by being 'tied to the home' for other reasons. In both cases 'home' is a fixed element in the equation. The notion that 'home' – or at least the physical manifestations of 'home' – can move on a regular but sometimes unpredictable basis is rarely acknowledged.

The relative positionings in distance education of people whose homes are fixed and those who take their homes with them were neatly summarised in the following extract from a review of "*Distance education around the world*".

Itinerant wanderers delivering information by word of mouth were perhaps the world's first distance educators bringing information from afar to eager recipients encountered during their travels. This centuries

old practice was irrevocably changed by the invention of writing and later, print. Print was first put to use in distance education with development of correspondence courses created by universities during the middle 1800s to disseminate learning beyond the walls of existing institutions. . . . Technology of information transfer has now outstripped the ability of educators and trainers to develop programs to serve the exponential increase in learners who wish to be educated outside traditional place-bound learning sites. (Brown & Brown, 1994, p. 5)

Here “*itinerant wanderers*” are positioned as belonging to the ‘prehistoric age’, before the advent of writing and printing. This view of itinerancy provides a stark contrast to the technological developments that enable learners “*to be educated outside traditional place-bound learning sites*”. By contrast, this thesis reveals that the itinerant show children in fact receive an education that is precisely non-place-bound in the way described by Brown and Brown (1994).

This study is significant, therefore, in seeking to direct attention to representatives of a generally undervalued lifestyle that **has** nevertheless a large number of manifestations: homeless youth, Gypsies, seasonal fruit pickers, fisherpeople, miners, circus people and participants in Australia’s several agricultural show circuits. These people and their forebears have been speaking for centuries, but their voices have typically not been heard by ‘the mainstream’ or ‘the centre’ – largely on account of their residential patterns, around which so much that is connected to identity and education is organised, deviating from ‘the norm’ of permanent residence.

Here I am using ‘speaking’ and ‘voice’, not literally in the sense of verbal interactions, but rather from a highly politicised perspective, which emphasises the analytical necessity of identifying what is said by whom, to whom, in which contexts, thereby drawing attention to the fact that, while some may speak and their voices are interpreted **as** commands that will be obeyed immediately, others may **speak** and their voices are regarded **as** being safely ignored. It is in this sense that this thesis is conceived as a counternarrative – **as** helping to record and disseminate an alternative ‘story’ about the purposes and effects of the show children’s educational experiences.

In addition, there are at least three ‘practical’ ways that the problem outlined above is significant. Firstly, policy makers and planners of the increasing number and range of specialised educational programs need information about the perceived effectiveness of such programs in addressing the clients’ needs, and also an understanding of how the results of policy *can* be consumed. This is so particularly in the context of the simultaneous trends during the 1990s and early 2000s of greater local control over decision making and increased requirements for accountability in the expenditure of public funds.

Secondly, the area of activity that **has** been assigned the broad label ‘open and distance learning’ has been promoted in some quarters as a possible panacea for all lunds of educational and socio-cultural ‘deficiencies’ in the existing education system. This study provides an opportunity to assess the extent to which such optimism is justified, by investigating one specific initiative in open and distance learning from the viewpoints of its clients.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, educational programs encapsulate many of the trends, pressures, values and behaviours evident in the society at large. In particular, identities – whether marginalised or otherwise – are created and contested within constructed learning situations, with the potential to render students empowered and literate (in its widest sense), or alternatively disempowered and less likely to participate fully in the post-industrial age. It is hoped that more far-reaching conclusions about the responses to and the consequences of educational programs in Australia will be made possible as a result of the investigation outlined below.

1.3 The research questions

As I indicated in the first section of this chapter, this study is concerned with the operation of a specialised education program designed for the show circuits of coastal and western Queensland. The program arose in **1989** as a direct consequence of the lobbying of the then Queensland Department of Education by members of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. These members were motivated by a strong desire to improve the educational opportunities available to their children, while at the same time to maintain their children's contact with the rich traditions of show life. The Guild members were successful in attaining their objective of pressing for the establishment of an education program specifically designed to meet the identified learning needs of their children. In 2000, the program was superseded by the establishment of a **separate** school for the show children.

This situation suggests two important characteristics of the show people. The first characteristic is their conviction that they constitute a special group, different from ‘mainstream’ Australian society. They have distinctive mobility and residential patterns; they use terms such as ‘showies’ and ‘mugs’ as conscious ways to valorise and strengthen their own identities; they cherish their links with previous generations of show people, **both** in Australia and in the United Kingdom. The show people see themselves, and they believe that other people see them, **as** belonging to a minority group.

The second characteristic of the show people with which this thesis is concerned is their political ‘know-how’. They use their heightened self consciousness of what they believe makes them different from other Australians to articulate a set of objectives, ranging from the education of their children to greater access to water and electricity at particular showgrounds. They formulate and enact a series of tactics to achieve those objectives, from seeking meetings with government ministers to reinforcing the show people’s considerable contributions to the local economy. They pride themselves on their persistence in overcoming obstacles that they believe would defeat less well-organised and less cohesive minority groups.

These two characteristics of the show people – their ‘difference’ and their political ‘know-how’ or agency – are taken up in the study’s three research questions. The first research question asks: ***“How do the show people experience marginalisation?”***. This question seeks to identify those **aspects** of the show people’s identity constructions and educational experiences that reflect their sense of being both distinctive and disadvantaged in comparison with ‘mainstream’ Australians.

The second research question asks: *“How do the show people resist their marginalised status?”*. This question derives from an assumption that, rather than passively accepting their disadvantage, show people exercise agency to ameliorate and if possible to change the bases of that situation.

Another dimension of the interplay between the show people’s ‘difference’ and their agency is the extent to which their position *vis-a-vis* other groups undergoes positive change. Pursuing this theme, the third research question asks: *“How do the show people transform their marginalising experiences and resistant practices?”*. While accepting that such a transformation is neither inevitable nor necessarily permanent, the question examines the possibilities of thinking otherwise about the show people’s identities and educational experiences.

These three research questions, then, are linked and integrated in the ways that they seek to reveal different aspects of the show people’s ‘difference’ and their agency. The first question examines how the show people’s marginalisation originates from their ‘difference’ from ‘mainstream’ society. The second question investigates how the show people exercise their agency to resist that marginalisation. The third question discusses the show people’s capacity to channel that agency to transform the marginalisation of their ‘difference’ to an understanding and a valuing of that ‘difference’. Or to express the political importance of each of the three data analysis chapters slightly differently: each helps to tell the story of the show people’s resistance and transformation, first by explaining the need for change, second by highlighting the potential for resistance, and third by discussing transformative moments associated with the circulation and endorsement of new ways

of thinking about show people and their education. The questions are therefore all filtered through reference to educational issues, but of necessity they also engage with a wider range of issues that help to demonstrate the concerns identified in the questions.

1.4 The outline of the thesis

This thesis is arranged in eight chapters. This chapter has stated the problem to be investigated and has outlined the significance of the problem, and has also articulated and explained the research questions to be answered. Chapter Two reviews selected literature about two key issues. Accounts of Australian shows are discussed. Several Australian and European studies in Traveller education are interrogated. In both cases, gaps in, and limitations of, the existing literature are identified to create spaces for this study's contribution to knowledge.

Chapter Three elaborates the conceptual framework of the study, beginning with an analysis of the connections between itinerancy and marginalisation from the perspective of Traveller education. Michel de Certeau's (1984) concept of 'tactics of consumption' is examined in detail, as are Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986a) notions of 'outsidedness' and 'creative understanding'. These ideas in combination constitute a conceptual approach that assists in understanding and theorising the interplay among marginalisation, resistance and transformation in the lives of the show people.

Chapter Four discusses the research design of the study. That design derives from, and builds on, the links between researching Traveller education and marginalisation, resistance and transformation on the one hand and de Certeauian ‘tactics of consumption’ and Bakhtinian ‘outsidedness’ and ‘creative understanding’ on the other. These elements have implications for the study’s ethical and political dimensions, which also articulate well with the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Three. Specific data gathering techniques are outlined, as are the study’s delimitations and limitations.

The next three chapters constitute the data analysis of the study. Chapter Five addresses the first research question, by examining the show people’s experiences of marginalisation. The second research question is considered in Chapter Six, which analyses the show people’s resistance of those marginalising experiences. Chapter Seven provides information relevant to the third research question, which examines how the show people’s tactics of consumption, and their capitalising on outsidedness and creative understanding, contribute to transforming their marginalising experiences and resistant practices, as well as to presenting a counternarrative about what Traveller education *can* and should be.

Chapter Eight draws the study to a close by synthesising the data analysis chapters’ answers to the three research questions outlined at the outset. It concludes by revisiting the personal note outlined below, as well as suggesting some possible directions for future research projects in Traveller education.

1.5 A personal note

In keeping with the practice of eschewing authorial anonymity favoured by the approaches to research ethics and politics adopted in this study, it is appropriate to insert here a brief personal note about the researcher. My research interests have a bearing on this study in at least two important respects.

Firstly, my substantive position as Foundation Lecturer, and more recently Senior Lecturer, in Open and Distance Learning in the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at Central Queensland University constitutes the framework for my interest in Traveller education. I consider that open and distance learning has much of value to learn – conceptually, methodologically and empirically – from the lives of people whose physical spaces change constantly, yet who aspire to continuity of learning in two senses: continuation of the education program regardless of physical location; and ensuring the continuation of a rich cultural tradition that is intimately connected with itinerancy. These shifting and fluid understandings of ‘place’ *can* significantly enhance current efforts within open and distance learning to theorise ‘mixed mode’ and ‘flexible’ approaches to educational provision.

Secondly, my previous research projects have concentrated on several types of ‘marginalised groups’. These have included Indigenous Australians, women students, student teachers, beginning teachers, academic staff members in recently proclaimed universities and proponents of unfashionable disciplinary paradigms. Despite the diversity of these groups and the varied rates of intensity with which I have studied them, the projects have given me a developing understanding of people whose identities are seen by significant

others **as** inferior or less valued in particular ways – or else **as** unacceptably challenging to the *status quo*. This understanding should assist my examination of the ‘marginalised group’ under review in this study. Furthermore, my long standing interest in ‘marginalised groups’ constitutes the academic background against which my use of postmodernist theory in this work takes place. That is to say, like Griffiths (1995, p. 224), I am “*interested in post-modernism – but only in so far as it is relevant to my wider values*”. For me, those “*wider values*” are intimately connected with the links and relations among social groups with differential power and status being reflected in the implementation of particular education programs.

In combination, these two points – my conviction of Traveller education’s potential contribution to theorising open and distance learning, and my focus on members of ‘marginalised’ communities – have had a significant impact on the way that I have designed and conducted the study reported in this thesis. In Chapter Four, I outline how I have sought to carry out Traveller education research by applying a more fluid and less dichotomised approach to the ‘researcher’ – ‘researched’ relationship. In Chapter Eight, I revisit this personal note by reflecting anew on the “*situated, partial and interested*” (Kenway & Willis with Blackmore and Rennie, 1998, p. xii) aspects of my developing subjectivity as a researcher. In this thesis, my interest in delineating my own ‘learning on the run’ operates in parallel with my identification of the show people’s educational experiences.