Show children’s perceptions of their schooling experiences in coastal Queensland:

“Sometimes they don’t understand that we’re more or less like them but just travel on”

Since 1989 a specialised education program has been provided by the Brisbane School of Distance Education for children whose parents follow the show circuit of coastal Queensland. Between 1992 and 1994 researchers at Central Queensland University investigated several elements of the program’s implementation. This paper reports on one aspect of that research: the show children’s perceptions of their schooling, as revealed through their views of the program. The particularities of the show children’s educational experiences, and
their frankness and vividness in describing those experiences, support the case for incorporating many more student perceptions into the education literature.

Introduction

In 1994 I identified three groups that constitute what I referred to as ‘the Bermuda triad’ on account of their having disappeared into an academic and research void: school pupils or students; non-supervising teachers; and school administrators. (Danaher 1994a, 215-216)

The context was a discussion of students’ perceptions of the teacher education practicum, in which they have a considerable stake but into which they generally have negligible input. This contradiction highlights a broader paradox in the education literature: despite recent rhetoric conceiving of schooling as a business, a service industry and a set of quality experiences, relatively little attention has been given to the views of the main consumers of educational services -- students. While there is no shortage of specialised studies dealing with such issues as teaching and learning in the primary classroom (Bennett 1990) and modern primary school practice (Bassett, Jacka and Logan 1982), the voices of those same students about whom so much is written are rarely heard directly.
Students' voices in the literature

This is not to deny that authentic presentations of students' views of schools are available. Collections of student commentaries on education in Britain (Blishen 1969) and Australia (Humphreys and Newcombe 1975) showed how lively and varied those commentaries can be. Measor and Woods (1983) presented a vivid ethnographic account of selected student myths among students making the transition from primary to secondary school; more recent research with a similar focus was reported by Delamont and Galton (1987). Pollard’s (1985) study of eighty eleven year old children in a British middle school revealed “a desire by children in schools to control their classroom experiences and render them predictable and personally ‘safe’” (57). Hartley’s (1985) Weberian investigation of an inner city British primary school contained extracts from interviews with students (as well as with teachers and parents). A recent description of traveller education in Britain (Foster, Pritchard, Siobhan, Gaffey and Joyce 1993) included the words of one traveller child about her experiences in a primary school.

Turning to Australia, we find that Fitzgerald (1974) provided a valuable comparison of the attitudes of teachers, students and parents towards the primary school’s role and function. In 1988 the Queensland Department of Education released a series of bulletins, called Research Insights, from a collection entitled Summaries of Research Findings About Young People and Their Attitudes Towards Secondary Schooling
Topics included the provision of care, curriculum and teaching, preparation for work and pressures on students. Price and Hallinan (1991) surveyed the perceptions of fifty-two secondary school students in provincial Queensland about a range of issues, including attitudes towards students, professional standards and communication. A study of senior secondary school students in twenty-two New South Wales schools (Ainley and Sheret 1993) included qualitative and quantitative data about the students’ attitudes to school life and their approaches to learning. Students’ responses to a survey questionnaire were used to identify highly effective teachers in Tasmanian government high schools (Holloway 1994), a process that demonstrated “the reciprocal acknowledgment of the normative ideals governing the interaction between teachers and students” (190).

This paper takes particular issue with the relative absence of the voices of primary school students from the education literature. Despite Fitzgerald’s claim that “a whole body of recent research suggests that the attitude of students towards the school program bears very much on successful learning” (1974, 25), the reluctance to record systematically students’ perceptions of their schooling experiences, particularly those of primary school children, largely remains. Certainly Price and Hallinan (1991) noted that, in relation to recording student opinion of education more generally, “Very little research of any kind on this topic was located” (53). The continuing neglect of student voices is especially regrettable in view of the ongoing documentation of the distinctive characteristics of Australian society in the 1990s (Fry 1994, 23) that presumably exercise considerable influence on what those voices say.
One outcome of the relative scarcity of detailed studies of student opinions of education has been a tendency to homogenise both the backgrounds and the educational experiences of students. Children who deviate from the ‘norm’ in terms of background have traditionally been ignored, or else have been assigned a ‘deficit’ label that schooling must attempt to ‘correct’ or ‘overcome’. Their educational experiences have been equally standardised and hierarchised, as a means of producing a differentially skilled labour force. A major challenge facing educational policy makers in the 1990s is the extent to which they are able to recognise and build upon the heterogeneity of students’ backgrounds, aspirations and needs, in order to provide varied and meaningful learning experiences for them. This challenge looms even larger when it is considered that students’ heterogeneity exists in a wider environment of vast and accelerated global, national, regional and local change (see for example Hayles 1990).

The remainder of this paper presents selected findings from an ongoing study of the educational experiences of children on the coastal Queensland agricultural show circuit (Danaher 1994b; Danaher, Rose and Hallinan 1994; Thompson and Danaher 1994). The intention is to demonstrate the utility of recording these students’ voices (which have hitherto remained largely silent), both for what they have to say about the particular educational program provided for them, and for their more general observations about their own situation and that of the ‘locals’ whom they meet.

The study
1989 saw the introduction of an innovative program of education for the primary school aged children of the coastal Queensland circuit of the Showmen’s Guild of Australasia. Under the program, which has expanded significantly since 1989 (for example, the numbers of students and teachers have grown, and the program is now also followed on the western Queensland circuit), teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education travel with the show children to selected towns along the circuit. For the week that the show is in town in those places, the teachers work with the children in a spare classroom at the government primary school that is closest to the local showgrounds. When the teachers return to Brisbane, the children continue working on correspondence papers; they maintain contact with the teachers by means of mobile telephones and facsimile machines. Some of the parents employ home tutors to give their children additional assistance; other parents act as tutors themselves. An important part of the teachers’ role lies in liaising with the parents/home tutors to check on the children’s progress and provide remediation where necessary.

This program stands in marked contrast to the schooling experienced by the show children in Queensland prior to 1989, and also to what they still encounter in other Australian States today. (There are currently moves to extend the program to New South Wales and Victoria, but to date this has not progressed beyond the lobbying stage.) Children who remained with the show could attend each local school on the circuit for four or five days, then move onto the next town; a variation on this was that they could complete their education by correspondence while still travelling with the
show. Alternatively, parents could send their children away, either to boarding school, or else to stay with relatives and attend the local day school. (Because the program set up by the Brisbane School of Distance Education caters only to primary school children, once they enter high school they must still choose from among these options.)

A study of this program has been undertaken by researchers from Central Queensland University. Between 1992 and 1994 eighty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with ninety-five participants in the program, including children, their parents, their home tutors and their School of Distance Education teachers. Interview transcripts have been interrogated using grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The focus has generally been on the ways that the show people use their social networks and peer relationships, their cohesive social structure and the program itself as tactics of subversion to resist the marginalising strategies of the mainstream (de Certeau 1984).

Selected findings: Show children’s perceptions of schooling

Fifty-four children were interviewed in the study about a wide range of matters, including their opinions of the education program, their roles on the show circuit and their career aspirations. This paper draws heavily on the comments of fourteen children, all of whom were interviewed by the author (including one who was interviewed twice during the three years of the study). They ranged in age from seven to fourteen; eight were boys and six were girls.
When asked to comment on the program, students were largely complimentary. They referred to the work as being easy to understand; they found the itinerant teachers helpful and approachable; those who worked with home tutors usually found this a productive situation; and they enjoyed the friendships of their peer groups. Mathematics was most commonly identified as the students’ favourite subject; English and history were nominated by individual students as their least preferred subjects. The preference for mathematics appeared to reflect the children’s adeptness from an early age at handling money and calculating change on their parents’ businesses. Most children performed some function -- some a number of functions -- on the show, ranging from selling hot dogs and fairy floss to helping to operate the dodgem cars and the smaller rides. The effective inculcation of the show lifestyle in the children’s minds meant that nearly all of them identified “working on the show” as their single or their most favoured career aspiration. Alternative aspirations, entertained by a minority of students, included working as a wildlife officer, an airline steward and a nurse.

Students’ perceptions of what might be termed ‘regular schooling’ (the local teachers working in their permanent classrooms) tended to be neutral or negative. An extreme comment was a description of “horrible teachers” who were “Grouch, always” and who contrasted with the itinerant teachers, who “Never get grumpy like those old teachers”. One girl commented about the local teachers:
They’re not very nice to us, that’s why we did this program. They treated us different from the local [student]s. We weren’t allowed to do things that they were allowed to do.

Another girl had a lingering and unhappy memory of a teacher in Dandenong in Victoria who chastised her for not playing sport, despite her having an injured collar bone. These reactions appeared to result from the teachers having insufficient time to develop a rapport with the show children, and from their general lack of understanding of the children’s situated learning.

A more common response was that the show children had very little contact with the local teachers or children. This was because, despite efforts by some local school principals to establish a ‘buddy system’, the show children almost always preferred to remain in their own tightly focused friendship groups. The reasons for this preference varied from not needing to extend their peer relationships (because the existing ones were so strong), to a disinclination to establish ties with someone one would not see beyond the end of the week, to a perception that ‘locals’ mistrusted show people and considered them shiftless and poorly educated.

Various comments reflected the show children’s perceptions of the students at local schools. The children had a clearly developed understanding of the ‘showie-local’ distinction. This was illustrated by one boy’s explanation of another’s changing status from ‘local’ to ‘showie’ (caused by his parents joining the show circuit):
[Being a local] means, like now we can get free rides and all that and he couldn’t and all that, and he had to pay for the tickets.

[If he’s a local doesn’t he travel with the show?]
No. He has to stay in one place. But now he’s a showman.

One boy responded to the question whether it was easy to establish friends among locals:

No, not easy at all. It’s hard to find a friend because all of us -- so stupid, don’t get anything done but we do get things done. And I say, don’t know what they’re missing out on.

One girl referred to the ‘buddy system’ as it operates in some local schools:

But sometimes you can have ... a buddy for a week, but sometimes they don’t really like you and sometimes you find another person, but they’re nicer.

Another girl explained, “We don’t get and make friends with other people because we’re just leaving again straightaway, ... ”. A boy rationalised his preference for developing friendships with show children rather than local children: “ ... I know them better and I can trust them. And they’re friends who have been friends for a long time”. A girl
described how, when the local children said, “Look, they’re show kids”, the show children responded by calling them “mugs”. This term meant that

... they’re locals and we’re show kids. So mugs have to pay to get on the rides and we don’t, because we know all the show kids.

The boy who claimed that “You make friends and move to another place. So you usually make friends at every show” was certainly not expressing a majority view.

On the other hand, the same boy’s rather wistful observation -- “Sometimes we just wish we could just stay at the one school” -- suggested that the novelty of constant travelling could sometimes pall. Some children acknowledged the particular difficulties of learning on the run. A representative comment was:

... it’s a bit ... easier when you’re settled in one school, because it’s hard, you can keep up with your work all right but ... if you’re travelling on a school day you miss out on one day and you have to catch up, and have to work faster, you have to rush for it.

Despite this comment, the show children exhibited very positive perceptions of the education program administered by the Brisbane School of Distance Education. They had established strong rapport with the itinerant teachers (whom they addressed by their Christian names, and who in some cases were regarded as members of the
extended family), and they largely enjoyed the program. One boy claimed that the show children “have a lot of fun” with the itinerant teachers. When asked from whom they seek help with difficult work, students most often identified the Brisbane teachers; otherwise a parent, a grandparent or an older sibling might be called on for assistance.

The show children expressed several comments about the work that they completed when the teachers returned to Brisbane. Whether working with a home tutor or with their mothers (very rarely was this role performed by a father), the children tended to complete their correspondence papers in the family caravan; a few children had a separate van that they could use as a mobile classroom. The home tutor/parent link with the Brisbane teachers was seen as very important; they were charged with supervising the students’ work and sometimes acted as intermediaries when a student needed to contact the teachers in Brisbane. The children were aware which of their peers worked with home tutors and which did not; this tended to be seen as reflecting the cooperative and collegial nature of learning on the show circuit, rather than as a status symbol representing parents’ differential valuing of education. (An exception was a seven year old boy’s confident assertion, “Gonna get one but”, in response to a question about whether he had a home tutor, his tone suggesting that the statement could have referred to the impending purchase of the latest video game.)

The show children revealed an interesting layering of meanings when they used the term ‘school’. Sometimes this referred to a building (the local school), to a place (the family caravan), to an institutional framework (the program administered by the
Brisbane School of Distance Education), and to relationships with particular people. When asked where he completed his school work, one boy responded, “Sometimes we do it at home, but we really do it at proper school”. Another boy referred (in a relatively sophisticated way for a ten year old) to sending and receiving papers “through the school mailing system”. A girl described how her mother replicated the routine of the local school when her daughter worked in their caravan:

Inside ... my caravan we make a classroom. ... we have exactly the same rules and we’ve got exactly the same time for our bell, one hour for big lunch and ... fifteen minutes for little lunch, and things like that.

Different students expressed preferences for working at home in the caravan or alternatively at the local school. One boy favoured the relative order and calm of the classroom over the constant noise and activity at the show. A ten year old girl had the opposite view:

Sometimes it’s better to go home because you can get more done sometimes than at school. Because we really work, do all our school work and then have lunch -- And people say, “Why do you get out so quick?”, and we say, “Because we do work all the time”.

Another student saw the benefits of both methods of working:
It’s better at home for one reason, because there’s not as many people so it doesn’t take as long. So you start about 9.30 and finish at about one o’clock. But at school you meet different people and make friends. So I like them about the same, really.

Conclusion

In discussing the largely positive view of the schooling program held by most of the show children, it is clear that at least some of their enthusiasm might be attributable to the ‘halo effect’ of being involved in an educational innovation. That is, external factors such as a general impression of the program’s obvious differences from previous offerings might exercise a greater influence than the specific attributes of the program itself on the children’s responses. The lobbying by their parents for the program’s establishment, and the obvious enthusiasm of the teachers who have been specially selected for the program -- not to mention the continuing interest of ‘outsiders’ like the researchers from Central Queensland University -- presumably incline the children to speak favourably of the program’s implementation.

While this ‘halo effect’ cannot be discounted as a possibility, there is evidence from the study to suggest that much more than the program’s ‘novelty value’ makes the show children favourably disposed towards it. The fact that the researchers have gone back twice in succeeding years since the original interviews were conducted, the confirmation that parents and home tutors are as enthusiastic as the children about the program, and
the capacity of respondents to identify precise features of the program that they particularly admire and that they wish to see extended in the future -- all these factors indicate that a more powerful force than the ‘halo effect’ is at work here. In addition, there are methodological advantages of examining the program relatively soon after its establishment. There is the benefit derived from direct comparison with previous educational offerings to show children while those offerings are still relatively fresh in the memory. A related advantage is that people are less likely to take for granted such initiatives as face to face contact between the itinerant teachers and their students, when only a few years ago this was unheard of. Thirdly, a person’s judgment about an experience is often suspended during the initial phase, which makes it less likely that participants will be reflecting deeply felt assumptions or biases when discussing the experience.

Some generalised points can be made about the show children’s perceptions of their schooling experiences, now that the likely ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ of those perceptions have been asserted. For many show children, local schools are uncomfortable places, at best temporary resting stops on the show circuit, at worst the dehumanised environments against which Paulo Freire and others have rebelled. Despite occasional friendly interactions, the show children’s relations with local teachers and students are mostly distant and restricted. Far more direct and multifaceted are their dealings with the itinerant teachers, who are generally respected and accepted into life on the circuit. The children typically expressed greatest interest in their relationships with their families, peers and teachers (thereby replicating Fry’s [1994] report of the major
concerns of Queensland teenagers in the 1990s.) The students articulated these various perceptions clearly, frankly and often with an unexpected sophistication of understanding of both themselves and ‘locals’.

In 1994 Benjamin Levin commented as follows:

The dominant conceptualisation of students in education research is not as acting subjects but as recipients of the actions of teachers and others. ... It is still far ... [too] common to find students described, if they are mentioned at all, as pawns in a game being played by others. (Levin 1994, 17)

This paper has argued that an important element of students attaining the status of players rather than that of pawns is the recognition of students’ heterogeneity. This recognition should take place in relation to both their backgrounds and their educational experiences. The program implemented by the Brisbane School of Distance Education for the show children of coastal Queensland is an example of a targeted initiative premised on the children’s ‘alternative’ backgrounds and catering to their distinctive learning needs and aspirations. The perceptions of the show children recorded in this paper -- what might be regarded as the outcome of charting part of the territory occupied by ‘the Bermuda triad’ -- present the most direct available justification for such programs.
References


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