

**A conversation about research as risky business:**

**Making visible the invisible in rural research locations**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Doing research in rural locations can present researchers with exciting possibilities, but also with challenges. In this chapter, we discuss some of our own experiences and reflect on the implications for researchers when preparing themselves for conducting research in rural communities. Specifically, this chapter foregrounds ethical and methodological issues faced by researchers working in these diverse locations and suggests tools that rural researchers may find useful. We present a conversation where we talk together (Sherilyn as a recently graduated doctoral student and Robyn as her doctoral supervisor) about some of our considerations when undertaking research in rural communities. Both of our projects investigated educational issues in our respective communities and, in many discussions during Sherilyn's candidature, it became apparent that there were similarities, not only in the nature of our research in and about rural areas, but also in the challenges that we experienced.

Through exploring some of the synergies between our doctoral studies – Sherilyn’s completed at the end of 2012 (Lennon 2013) and Robyn’s completed in 2005 (Henderson 2005) – our conversation highlights the sometimes risky business of trying to trouble the taken-for-granted social practices that can exist in a given community. In our research projects, we attempted to make visible particular inequities that seemed to be operating in the rural communities in which we lived or had lived for some time. These related to gender in Sherilyn’s study and to the educational disadvantage, particularly literacy underachievement, that seemed to be experienced by itinerant farm workers’ children in Robyn’s study. In both studies, we set out to make visible the invisible.

In this chapter, we aim to make explicit or visible some of the considerations that would seem important for those wanting to conduct research in rural contexts. From our perspectives as insider researchers, we consider some of the methodological issues that we experienced as we conducted our research. We also extend our discussion to include possible implications for researchers who do not reside in rural communities. Before presenting our conversation, we describe briefly the approach taken in this chapter and our doctoral research projects which were conducted in rural areas.

## **USING A REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION TO FRAME THE CHAPTER**

In our preparation for this chapter and in the tradition of Shor and Freire (1987), we recorded a conversation where we reflected critically on our experiences of conducting educational research in a rural context. Following transcription, we re-ordered and

edited elements of the conversation to eliminate pauses, false starts and irrelevant or extraneous information. If necessary, we added details that would ensure that readers – most of whom we realized would not have specific contextual knowledge of relevance to our discussion – could make sense of what we had discussed. This *said it and edit* process has resulted in a more coherent conversation that illustrates the points that we wish to make about doing educational research in rural settings.

In a sense, we present a text that draws together elements of autobiography and academic research (Lather and Smithies 1997). We used the process of critical reflection suggested by Macfarlane, Noble, Kilderry and Nolan (2005), thus framing our conversation with the four steps of deconstructing, confronting, theorizing and thinking otherwise. In the final version of our conversation, however, we downplay the theorizing aspect by keeping references to the literature to a minimum. We think this has achieved our purpose of maintaining readability.

Where necessary, we refer to relevant literature in the commentary that links sections of the conversation together. Our commentary serves a purpose similar to the production technique that is often called a ‘voice-over’. It allows us to use a shared research voice, thus ensuring that particular points are noted by readers. In effect, this technique has activated the theorizing step of Macfarlane *et al.*’s (2005) model of critical reflection, allowing us to maintain the informal style of our conversation while still providing an academic perspective.

## **SHERILYN’S STUDY**

Sherilyn's research (Lennon 2013) stemmed from her concern over the disproportionately high number of boys performing poorly at her local high school. Unlike the situation reported in other locations, where schooling is set up 'to usher young people out of the community and into opportunities' elsewhere (see Corbett 2007: 1), this community provided many skilled and unskilled employment options for its boys, regardless of their schooling performances. Indeed, as one fifteen year old boy explained to Sherilyn, 'I've already got three jobs lined up ... I don't need to pass anything for any of them!'

Sherilyn's research was conducted in a traditional Australian bush town complete with wide tree-lined streets and a skyline dominated by hotels. The township is a service centre for the surrounding industries of dry land cropping, grazing, cotton and irrigation. With a town and shire combined population of more than 8,000, the diversity of agricultural industries in the community means that it has managed to thrive despite prolonged droughts and recent record-breaking floods.

Sherilyn has been a teacher at the local high school and a member of this community for more than a quarter of a century. She understands her hometown as a place where most people know each other and one another's family histories, where lives are dependent on and interconnected by the seasons, and where individuals are governed by a strict but unwritten code of cultural beliefs and practices. She recognizes dominant discourses that circulate in the community and support practices whereby farming land is passed down from fathers to sons and men are encouraged to take chief financial and civic

responsibility for their families and the wider community. Other dominant discourses she has identified construct women as the community's homemakers, caregivers and cultural gatekeepers. They also naturalize and normalize the construction of girls as outperforming boys at school. The photograph in Figure 9.1 shows part of a rural landscape that is typical in the context where Sherilyn's research was conducted.

FIGURE 9.1 NEAR HERE

By adopting sociocultural understandings of gender, Sherilyn used her study to focus on the gender messages local boys were receiving from home, school, sporting clubs, and community texts. Initially she sought to deepen her understandings of what it was boys were valuing if it was not their schoolwork. However, as the study progressed and Sherilyn's understandings of the links between heteropatriarchal constructions of gender and boys' schooling performances deepened, she felt compelled to act. This led her to publish a letter in the local newspaper, challenging a well-known local logo that she interpreted as perpetuating discourses of white male entitlement and violence against women. Sherilyn's letter to the editor opened up a space for community members to engage in extensive public and private discussions relating to local gender beliefs and practices. Considerable data were generated as these discussions spread across, and occasionally beyond, the community.

Sherilyn drew on case study traditions (e.g., Merriam 1998), critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough 2001), reflexive dyadic interviewing techniques (e.g., Kincheloe and Berry 2004), critical ethnography (e.g., Foley and Valenzuela 2005), autoethnography

(e.g., Ellis 2004), and aspects of radical (e.g., Giroux 2001) and public pedagogy (e.g., O'Malley and Roseboro 2010). Her approach built links between community constructions of gender, schooling performances and local power inequities. It also enabled Sherilyn to add to knowledge in the emerging fields of transformative and activist pedagogies.

## **ROBYN'S STUDY**

Robyn's research (Henderson 2005) was conducted in a coastal town in North Queensland, where she had lived and worked for almost 25 years before beginning doctoral studies. During the winter harvesting season each year, the town's population was swelled by up to 3,000 itinerant farm workers, many of whom returned to the town on an annual basis. Figure 9.2 shows some of the farms that provided seasonal work. With the influx of farm workers, approximately 100 school-aged children also arrived in the town and enrolled in the local schools, with 60 of them enrolling in the primary school where Robyn conducted her research. Depending on the factors that influenced the harvest, including the weather and market prices, children sometimes stayed for as long as six months, although sometimes they stayed for a much shorter time.

FIGURE 9.2 NEAR HERE

Using ethnographic techniques for data collection, including semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, classroom observations and an artifact collection, Robyn conducted six family case studies. Drawing on Fairclough's (2001) text-interaction-

context model, she used critical discourse analysis to do both textual and social analysis. This yielded insights into the social and discursive construction of itinerant children and their families within the school and the wider community, as well as the literacy learning of this particular group of itinerant children.

The study found that teachers' narratives about itinerant farm workers' children were predominantly negative. They constructed the children and their families in deficit and stereotypical terms and identified the families' itinerant lifestyles as impacting negatively on the children's literacy learning. These narratives contrasted with those told by the families as they provided insights into what it meant to live an itinerant lifestyle. The families' practices were often very different from the commonsense assumptions of teachers. Robyn concluded that there was a desperate need for teachers to shift the focus away from deficit stories towards the literacy strengths that itinerant children bring to school. She sees this as a first step towards ensuring more productive and responsive pedagogies that will assist the children with being successful at school literacy learning.

## **BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION: BEING AN INSIDER RESEARCHER IN A RURAL COMMUNITY**

In the next two sections, we present the conversation that resulted from the *said it and edit* process that we implemented. We begin by talking with our shared researcher voice, which reappears in places throughout the conversation.

Research has acknowledged that there is a ‘lack of research on diverse rural populations’ (Donehower *et al.* 2012: xiv). This absence of research has enabled mainstream perceptions of rurality to shape and inform how particular communities are conceptualized. As a result, those who live in the Australian ‘bush’ are often described in stereotypical ways. These include romantic notions which celebrate and mythologize people’s ‘rural past and character’ and deficit stories that depict ‘rural places and people as lacking educational, economic, and cultural resources’ (Donehower *et al.* 2012: xiv).

Although educational research is often confined to schools and events inside the school gate, Giroux’s (2001: 56) ‘correspondence principle’ highlights the way that the microcosm of a school often reflects what is happening in the wider community. In both of our research projects, we applied this principle to the research we conducted. In attempting to understand particular dynamics in schools – gender in Sherilyn’s study and literacy underachievement in Robyn’s – we collected data from school and community sources.

Sherilyn:     Apart from the extended period of time that we both spent in our communities prior to our research, where I also see us overlapping is in our decision to go beyond the school and into the wider community to collect data. Did you make a conscious decision to do this?

Robyn:        Yes, I did. From living in the community, I was aware that the stories I had heard in the school about itinerant farm workers were similar to stories I had heard in the community; plus I was using Fairclough’s context-interaction-text model, from his book *Language and Power*. In

using that model, I had already decided that I was interested in the context. I wanted to investigate the broader community context and the stories that were in circulation there. How did you come to the conclusion that collecting community data was important?

Sherilyn: I had been working with other teachers and across schools on projects to re-engage boys in their schooling for many years and, whilst I certainly had some successes, I noticed that when the boys finished the class or the project or the year and moved on to another teacher they would, more often than not, just revert to their previous patterns of behaviour. I started to realize that what I doing was just band-aiding an issue. If I really wanted to make a difference then I had to start thinking about the boys' schooling performances, or lack thereof, differently. The problem couldn't just be explained away as a faulty school curriculum or inadequate teaching. I had to start thinking about the issue of underperformance as a cultural issue. I needed to understand what boys were really valuing if it wasn't their schoolwork, how gender roles were being acted out within and across the community, and what the hidden curriculum might be teaching our boys about schooling and its place in their lives.

Robyn: It seems that our inclusion of the wider community in our research had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it offered insights into how and why particular practices within the school came to be. Yet, on the other hand, the involvement of the wider community had particular implications for us as researchers. And these are worthy of discussion.

Sherilyn: Yes. Whilst we overlapped on some things we operated in really different ways on others, didn't we? We were both insider researchers, but you worked at making school discourses and practices visible, to show how they worked against the itinerant farm workers' children. In contrast, I set out to deliberately and publically confront some of the inequitable gender practices and discourses that were operating in my community.

Robyn: You were definite in your plans to change the community. My research was aimed at understanding why the itinerant farm workers' children were not achieving at school, despite appearing to be bright and capable in so many ways.

Sherilyn: Your research didn't set out to confront members of the community as mine did. You were seeking to understand the issue more deeply in a non-confrontational way, but I set out to provoke a reaction from community members, as a way of challenging the status quo.

Although our research projects were quite different in their intent, we were both positioned as insider researchers, with knowledge about and experiences of the communities in which we were conducting our research. Both research projects were investigating aspects of the social world and, as Austin (2012: 221) highlighted, this type of research 'is always a troubling and frequently a morally tortuous process'. Social research uses 'other people's lives as data' (Lather 2007: 52) and, in small communities where almost everyone knows each other, this can provide challenges for researchers. In the conversation that follows, we begin to identify some of those challenges and some of the benefits that we experienced as insider researchers.

Robyn: I know one day you talked about how the ‘bush telegraph’ operated in your community.

Sherilyn: Yes, it was amazing how quickly news of my research was transmitted within, across, and even beyond the community. Whilst many admitted to never having read my original letter to the editor, it seemed as though everyone was talking about it and had an opinion on it. When you’ve challenged something that hasn’t been challenged before or questioned something that has become so familiar that it is invisible in the cultural landscape, you can create enormous unrest in a community. And news about that can travel through the community really quickly.

Robyn: Can you give me an example?

Sherilyn: As you know, I wrote a number of letters to the editor of the local newspaper, questioning the use of what I thought was an inappropriate logo. The editor told me that in his 25 years in the community there had only ever been one other issue that had created such unrest. In some ways it was validating that my voice could have such an impact in my community, but in other ways it was quite unsettling. My actions and the reactions I got from others made me reconsider who I was, where I was, how I was positioned in my community, and how I was positioning others.

Robyn: Being an insider researcher seems to have been an important part of your study.

Sherilyn: Yes. Yes. Most definitely. Having been on the inside for more than a quarter of a century before conducting my doctoral research meant that I had the time to build a very deep knowledge of the community and its cultural beliefs and practices.

Once I started looking at my community through critical lenses, I knew almost immediately where I should start collecting data. Yet in some ways that *already there knowledge* had the capacity to limit my thinking and blind me, blind me in two ways. Firstly, because I already knew whose stories would be useful to my study, there was a temptation to ignore other sources of data or not to go looking for alternative stories. Secondly, researching from the inside meant that the ideologies, discourses, practices, traditions, behaviours, customs and gender performances I was exposed to daily had become so normal and natural to me that I sometimes found it hard to look at them differently.

Robyn: So how did you get around that?

Sherilyn: One of the methods I used for overcoming these dilemmas was to deliberately wear lenses that distorted my readings of local media articles. I would mentally change around the gender roles or the cultural representations of the people appearing in the images and stories in the local newspaper. If I did that and it transformed the story into one that I considered would be confronting for most community members – you know, one that I knew would never appear in the local newspaper – then I knew that I had something that was worth examining further. I adopted this process from McLaren’s 2003 work. He calls this process, which makes the familiar strange and vice versa, ‘pedagogical surrealism’. In my research, it helped me to move beyond the view that it’s normal for girls to outperform boys at school, that it’s normal for women to drive their men home from parties after the men have had too much to drink, that it’s normal for men to control the finances, and that its normal for women to serve and for men to be served.

Robyn: Ah, so you used a role swapping technique to see if the data were useful for confronting and challenging community practices. Interestingly, if you were a researcher from outside the community, then you would probably not have been privy to that information at all.

Sherilyn: True. Being an insider gave me insider knowledge of school and community discourses, beliefs and practices and ready access to these.

Robyn: So how do you think outsiders might deal with access issues?

Sherilyn: It's really important to know who to contact and where to go to collect useful data. As insider researchers we already had extensive knowledge of our communities. Perhaps one strategy for outsider researchers would be to find ways of accessing local knowledge. What do you think?

Robyn: I think you're right. When I go back to the town where I collected my data, there are always two places I go – the pie shop and the supermarket. It probably seems strange to those who don't know the community, but those are places where it pays to be seen. I always spend time there, because I know that word gets around really fast that I'm in town. People are always interested to know how my life is going in the outside world and they want to talk and fill me on happenings in the community since my last visit.

Sherilyn: That obviously helps to maintain your insider status.

Robyn: Yes, it does, even though I haven't been a resident in the community for quite some years now. When I began my doctoral research, many years ago, I was told that a group of researchers from another university had tried to conduct research relating to farm workers. However, because they weren't living and working in the particular community they had chosen, they had trouble finding research

participants. When you have a relationship with a community, you know who to ask, where to go, and the types of protocols that you need to follow.

Sherilyn: I feel guilty – and I hate to admit it – of having been selected for research surveys on email or on the phone and, because I’m so busy and because I don’t know the researcher, I sometimes say, ‘No, I’m sorry I can’t help you out at the moment’. So being an insider gives you an advantage because of those personal relationships that you’ve built.

Robyn: There are clear messages for outsider researchers, aren’t there? They need to build a relationship with the community and that can take time.

Our conversation highlighted important relational considerations that we had used as insider researchers. We acknowledge that our long-term relationships with our respective communities were helpful, particularly in terms of knowing who to contact and what community protocols to follow. Yet we also recognize that closeness to a community can make it difficult to critique the community’s hegemonic beliefs and practices and its social and cultural traditions. As Sherilyn highlighted, she used a particular process (see Lennon 2013), based on McLaren’s (2003: 189) concept of ‘pedagogical surrealism’, to make the familiar strange.

## **POSITIONING SELF AND OTHERS; REPOSITIONING SELF AND OTHERS**

It was important for us to acknowledge that we had probably been acculturated by our communities into accepting certain beliefs and practices as normal and natural. Our considerations about these issues involved making ethical decisions and consciously

repositioning or decentering ourselves (Berry 2006), in order to see with ‘new eyes’ our cultural landscapes and the issues being investigated. This was not always an easy task. Our conversation continues and we further explore some of the complexities associated with being positioned as insider researchers in small, somewhat isolated, rural communities.

Sherilyn: One of the things I noticed during my study was the gap between how I was trying to position my research and how others expected me to position it – and how they expected me to position them in it. There seemed to be an assumption that I would present the dominant social order in a favourable way. When I started to question commonsense practices and beliefs, it was as if I was threatening established power bases. That wasn’t always comfortable.

Robyn: I know what you mean. I had worked in the school where I conducted my research. The principal seemed to think that my study was going to solve ‘the problem’ of farm worker students. It was as if I’d be able to produce a magic bullet.

Sherilyn: And that didn’t happen?

Robyn: As we know, research often helps us understand the problem in more detail rather than solving it.

Sherilyn: Yes.

Robyn: I found that the more data I collected, the more complicated it became. For example, when I started to collect the families’ stories and began to compare the families’ stories with the teachers’ stories, I realized that I

had two completely different perspectives. One particular teacher story was about a Tongan family. The teachers regarded the parents' absences away from the town as evidence of poor parenting. However, my interviews with the parents suggested that there was much more to the story than teachers knew about. I began to understand that the family worked hard to make sure that their children's schooling wasn't too disrupted by their itinerant lifestyle. They tried really hard to keep their children in the same school.

Sherilyn: So did this impact on your research?

Robyn: Yes, it impacted on my thinking about how I would represent the stories. I didn't want to set up a binary of teachers' stories against parents' stories. It wasn't as if one set of stories was right and the other was wrong.

Sherilyn: So what did you do?

Robyn: I thought about how I could theorize the different stories that were evident in the data. I was investigating discourses, so that helped to shift the focus away from the individuals who told the stories. There were times, though, when I chose to not record conversations with research participants. Some of the issues were sensitive and recording the conversations seemed too intrusive. Instead I wrote my recollections of those conversations in my researcher journal.

Sherilyn: I can so identify with your stories of turning off the audio recorder and the principal making an assumption that you were going to present his perspective and his school favourably. Another issue that I am starting to

identify as problematic for rural researchers is the potential for our work to re-position us in our communities. There can be that perception that we are ‘digging for dirt’ or somehow trespassing on haloed ground because we are documenting or challenging deeply ingrained assumptions.

Robyn: Challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, practices or beliefs isn’t easy.

Sherilyn: I think one of the biggest challenges is finding ways of making sure the research is meaningful, yet also maintaining good relationships with the community. If you want your research to be productive then you probably need to shift people’s thinking. But how do you do that without breaking trust or distancing yourself too far from the very people who need to be a part of the change-making process?

Robyn: And that comes back to the position of the researcher and how, regardless of the perspective you take, you need to maintain a positive relationship with the community you’re researching. Part of doing that involves trust.

Sherilyn: You have to be trusted to be able to do that in a professional and ethical way.

Robyn: The community needs to trust that you are going to represent them in a way that they see as okay.

Sherilyn: And on that, my experience has been that particular groups within a community can be somewhat suspicious or mistrusting of outsiders. If you’re an academic or researcher from a university then you’re probably operating from an unknown for a lot of people – and I certainly don’t mean that in a disrespectful way.

Robyn: No.

Sherilyn: What I am saying is that it is rare to have universities or tertiary institutions located in isolated rural communities. It's not likely that the residents of these communities will have had much exposure to researchers or academics. If you're a long-term member of the community then I guess you have some advantages over an outsider researcher, but it really keeps coming back to the importance of taking the time to form those relationships, doesn't it?

Robyn: I know with my study that some of the information that came from families was information they had tried to hide from the community. On the one hand, I knew I was at the point where they trusted me completely and were willing to reveal such information, but I also knew that my use of that information would have been doing exactly what the families had tried to avoid. That meant that there were ethical issues involved.

Sherilyn: In some situations there could even have been legal issues involved. Even though you do everything you can to protect identities, if people recognize themselves, or recognize their partners, or recognize other members of the community, then the reality is that you can destroy lives.

Robyn: That goes back to it being a small community, doesn't it? Even though we say we will maintain confidentiality and we will use pseudonyms to offer anonymity, sometimes there is a risk that people will be identified by others in the community, especially when the community is small and most people know each other.

Sherilyn: Yes. Exactly. You need to weigh up that risk and make a decision about

whether to use the data or not. I knew that including some of the data I had collected could have been harmful to certain people, their reputations and their relationships. For example, there were a number of sexual assaults that I was told about and some of them involved minors. These had either been dealt with by the authorities or happened a long time ago and the victim didn't want to press charges. I needed to be very, very careful when dealing with this information.

Robyn: How did you handle that?

Sherilyn: I had to make decisions about what to put in my study and what to leave out. Research can be risky business. Whilst someone might argue that leaving certain data out watered down my study, I think I could argue that leaving them out increased the study's integrity and ethical standing.

Robyn: What about in terms of having to live in that community? As part of your research you've done quite a bit of disrupting and unsettling, but you want to stay in the community.

Sherilyn: Yes. That's right. What I said and did throughout my research broke a lot of cultural boundaries and certainly unsettled particular groups within the community. There is no doubting that. There are some individuals who will probably never be comfortable speaking to me again. I've been publically branded a 'nihilist' and an 'alarmist' by some and I don't think I will ever be able to change those perceptions. But I'm not sure that I want to either. I'm comfortable with my stance. I believe in what I am doing. I've been accused of being a man-hater and I get irritated when I hear that because I know I'm not. But I have to balance that with: 'Well,

what have I done to make you feel that way? How much must I have challenged your thinking and practices for you to say that or react like that?’ I set out to irritate the taken-for-granted and I certainly did that but, in the process, I also unsettled myself. This reciprocal unsettling incorporated some steep and deep learnings about the power of the insider researcher but also about the potential for impact on the insider researcher.

Robyn: But interestingly, if you were a researcher from outside the community, then you would probably not have collected that rich data or had such an impact. Yet, an outside researcher who did so much disrupting and unsettling might close the doors to all future research in that community.

Sherilyn: So true. And that leads me to another dilemma that I had with my study. Because I was using a critical framework, I needed to represent and critique the views of others, but somehow I had to avoid setting myself up as some sort of judge and jury who alone knew ‘the real truth’. Such an approach would not have endeared me to anyone.

Robyn: Of course.

Sherilyn: I think that’s why polyvocality became so important to my study. Whilst my voice was obviously the dominant one, because I decided what to do, what to include, what to exclude and how to analyze it, it became really important for me to include a whole plethora of voices and different belief systems in the study. Some of these aligned with my thinking, but some didn’t.

Robyn: Yes.

Sherilyn: I felt it was important to include substantial extracts presenting others' points of view, without censoring or editing them to death first. After I'd typed up the transcripts of interviews, I gave the interviewees two weeks to do any editing they wanted and make changes before adding the transcripts to my data bank. In my study there was a whole chapter where community members told their stories, you know, talked about how they were thinking or feeling about the gender issue. I wanted to let the community speak for itself. I think as researchers we need to keep reminding ourselves that we are working with real people who can offer different but equally valid insights into community issues. They are not just pieces of data for us to manipulate, use and analyze.

Our conversation has highlighted some of the important decisions that we had to make as researchers. These related to our own positioning in the research, the ways that we could present and represent data and data analysis (see Henderson 2005, 2009; Lennon 2013), and the ethics of our decisions (see Henderson 2008). In particular, we recognize how vital it was to think through such issues, especially when challenging seemingly accepted sociocultural practices, either in the school or in the wider community (Lingard *et al.* 2000).

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Rural communities present varied opportunities for research. Each community has its own issues, stories and life rhythms. Schools servicing such communities cannot help

but be influenced by the ideologies, discourses and practices of these diverse, but often distinctive, cultural contexts. Whilst schools like to see themselves as social sites which teach ‘democratic values while demanding social control’ (Giroux, 2001: 54), educators and researchers working in rural communities sometimes fail to notice and make explicit the links between the wider community’s dominant ideologies, discourses and practices and students’ schooling performances – or lack thereof. As a result, schools and their teachers can end up perpetuating social inequities inherited from the hidden curriculum operating within and beyond the school gates.

Our doctoral research projects set out to ‘open up and disrupt taken-for-granted ways of interpreting the world’ (Somerville 2012: 71). Whilst such research practice can be potentially risky business, we posit that if long-lasting and far-reaching cultural change is to be achieved for some of our most marginalized schools and their students, then it is necessary for educational researchers to move beyond the school site and into the wider community that supports it. Keddie and Mills (2007: 204) hinted at the value of doing this when they stated that ‘schools do undergo change ... school structures and procedures are not fixed by their histories and are always open to transformation. ... such transformations require a knowledge of and engagement with the local community’.

In our conversation about our own doctoral research projects, we identified some of the challenges and issues that researchers can face when doing research in rural places. Because we lived, or had lived, in the rural communities where we conducted our research, we became aware of some of the difficulties of wanting to make visible the

invisible. However, both of us were insiders and that meant that we brought long-term knowledges, experiences and insights of our communities to our research.

Using our insider perspectives, this chapter has explored some of the risks and rewards of conducting research in rural locations. In particular, we highlighted some of the methodological issues that challenged us. We noted Sherilyn's use of McLaren's (2003: 189) process of 'pedagogical surrealism', ways of accessing local knowledge, the importance of building relationships with community members, the need to engage with and reflect on ethical dilemmas, and the effects on the researcher of being an insider.

The chapter has presented a case for moving beyond the school setting and into the wider community in order to deepen understandings of students' performances and address issues associated with discourses and practices that can work to limit students' lives. It has also argued for the importance of building relationships of trust with those whose lives the research touches, including those who are participants in the research as well as the broader community. Additionally, the chapter suggested some considerations and strategies for those who wish to research in communities where they would be regarded as outsiders.

We recognize that our conversation focuses on only two rural communities. Although they were more than a thousand kilometers apart, both were located in Queensland, Australia, and each was within three hours drive from a regional city. While we do not intend to stereotype rural communities or generalize from our experiences in these particular communities, our critically reflective conversation (Macfarlane *et al.* 2005)

has highlighted aspects of our research that were potentially risky and therefore warranted our consideration. In exploring our actions and thinking about these issues, we have presented practical strategies that may help others deal with some of the dilemmas of conducting educational research in communities where everybody knows each other. Our own position ‘should always be held in a critical light’ (Leistyna 2012: 216) and our research responses should, of course, demonstrate an ethical and responsible approach.

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