

Chapter 15

Dangerous terrains: Negotiating ethical dilemmas

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Applying for ethical clearance and conducting research in ethical ways are part of due process and procedure in educational research. However, research that focuses on the social and cultural dimensions of people's lives, especially when marginalised groups are involved, may not always run according to plan. Researchers may find that the terrain is much more dangerous than was originally anticipated, even though potential difficulties had been considered in the planning and preparation stages of the research. Indeed, the negotiation of ethical dilemmas is sometimes an ongoing and significant component of the research journey. To exemplify, this chapter presents some of the ethical dilemmas I experienced as I conducted research into the social and discursive construction of itinerant farm workers' children as literacy learners. It focuses on the aspects of dangerous and troubling terrain that I had to negotiate and discusses the necessity for ongoing and reflexive ethical considerations as researchers traverse and sometimes transform the terrains of contemporary educational research.

Introduction

Social research is said always to involve risks and ethical considerations (Burns, 2000; Coombes, Danaher & Danaher, 2004). Educational researchers in universities operate under a set of national guidelines for conducting ethical research and guaranteeing participants' welfare and rights, confidentiality and safe data storage. The most recent *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* argues for relationships between researchers and research participants to be built on "trust, mutual responsibility and ethical equality" and for the incorporation of "the values of respect for human beings, research merit and integrity, justice, and beneficence" (National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2007, p. 11).

Educational research, especially when conducted within school contexts, offers a further layer of concern to researchers who have to be cognisant of the ethics of working with children. Research with children brings a particular set of considerations into play (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007). These relate to children's capacity to understand what the research might involve, the potential for children to be coerced into participating and the possibility of conflicting values between children and adults.

The presence of proactive procedures for preventing and minimising ethical difficulties gives the impression that research processes will operate smoothly and unproblematically in a "neat, packaged, unilinear" fashion (Punch, 1998, p. 159). This, however, is not always the case, particularly for researchers drawing on qualitative and ethnographic traditions which rely on the data collection methods of participant observation and interviewing to investigate aspects of people's social and cultural practices – their lived experiences. As Punch explained, researchers need to recognise "the political perils and ethical pitfalls of actually carrying out research," because "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" (p. 159).

Although such insights might be painfully obvious to experienced researchers, this is not always the case for 'beginners'. As an enthusiastic doctoral candidate and neophyte researcher, I was hopeful that my research would travel across flat terrain, that the journey would be uneventful in ethical terms and that I would be rewarded with epistemological insights and opportunities for further research. At the same time, however, I knew that my research might present ethical considerations, as it focused on students whose families often seemed to be in marginalised positions in the community. As my research progressed, it became obvious that ethical dilemmas were integral to the research process and afforded many opportunities for critical reflection about relationships with and amongst research participants.

This chapter begins by discussing ethics as an issue in educational research. It then considers some of the ethical dilemmas that arose as I interviewed teachers, students and families from one school site over a two-year period, and provides insights into the deliberations and negotiations that were necessary to ensure ethical responses to these issues.

Ethics and critique in educational research

Within universities, researchers applying for ethical clearance under the *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007) are expected to focus particularly on issues of privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, participant well-being and data management. Even though the paperwork required by universities can imply that ethical considerations are easily managed, research textbooks often

highlight the complexities and dilemmas that may be faced (for example, Kirsch, 1999; Patton, 2002). Indeed, many texts point out that ethical issues may be quite complex and may appear at any stage of the research process, especially within the processes of conducting interpretive qualitative research and using the techniques of participant observations, emic perspectives and thick descriptions (for example, Howe & Moses, 1999; Kirsch, 1999; Punch, 1998). According to Punch, ethical dilemmas in relation to practical, ethical, professional and legal issues may be "fundamental" to a research project (p. 167).

The extent to which a piece of research is "sensitive" or "innocuous" (using the language of Lee & Renzetti, 1993, p. 5), however, cannot always be determined in advance and the sensitive nature of research may not emerge until research practices are underway. Although proactive attempts to think about and plan for potential risks or dangers are essential, researchers need to be aware that not all issues are predictable or immediately obvious. 'Textbook advice' for researchers has been variously cautious. Patton (2002), for example, suggested that care is needed because "it's dangerous out there" (p. 415), while Punch (1998) argued that researchers should "get out and do it," as long as they recognise that "no one in his or her right mind would support a carefree, amateuristic, and unduly naïve approach" (p. 157). Punch also highlighted the importance of "think[ing] a bit first" and "stop[ping] and reflect[ing] on the political and ethical dimensions" (p. 180).

It seems, though, that particular types of research can foreground particular types of ethical issues (Howe & Moses, 1999). Issues of confidentiality, privacy and participant well-being, which are generally the foci of the institutional documents mentioned above, are particularly significant in interpretive qualitative research. Although a number of techniques, such as the use of pseudonyms for research participants and their locations, are often employed to protect those involved, these practices are not always failsafe. However, according to Howe and Moses, breaches of anonymity tend to be more of a problem when "a negative picture is painted by a report of a community or some of its members" (p. 45). Although the involvement of participants in dialogue about research findings or the contents of research reports can help to reduce concerns that participants might have, Howe and Moses emphasised that "this is only a partial remedy" and will not necessarily be acceptable (p. 45).

Howe and Moses (1999) also raised the particularly difficult issue of how to proceed when "a negative picture might be called for" (p. 45), questioning what happens in a situation where "a community (or school) and its leaders can be characterised as profoundly racist and sexist" (p. 45). They asked: "Shouldn't such findings be reported in the interests of those who are being oppressed, at the site in question and elsewhere?" (p. 45). Questions like this highlight the importance of thinking about issues related to researchers' responsibilities to

participants and to the audiences of research. While Howe and Moses suggest that researchers need to be careful about making judgements, others have taken the view that research is meant to be transformative and that critique is a necessary part of the change process (for example, Gidley & Inayatullah, 2002; Lincoln, 2002). However, as Ropers-Huilman (1999) pointed out, it can sometimes be difficult for researchers 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” (p. 21).

In educational contexts, where the critique of educational practices or sites seems commonplace (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Kirsch, 1999), issues surrounding researcher responsibility and audience are worthy of consideration. Although critique is often balanced with reminders about the potential for multiple and varied ‘readings’ of data and the impossibility of objective descriptions (Allen, 2004), tensions may exist between researchers and research participants over challenges to the ‘ways things are done’ in schools and perceived criticism of teachers. This can particularly be the case for research that considers the marginalisation of students within school settings and advocates for institutional change. In Ropers-Huilman’s opinion (1999), researchers who want to work towards social justice have to make “sound research choices within the competing demands, struggles, and uncertainties of inquiry” (p. 34).

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 have been seen to engage in social critique, but avoid getting their “hands dirty with the sticky matter of what educationally is to be done” (p. 54). As a result, he suggested that researchers need “an ethical and political metanarrative” that offers “a powerful, shared normative vision of what education can and should be” (pp. 49, 53). The clear message here is that an ethical stance for researchers requires more than critique and should investigate a path forward.

Focusing on one research project

The issues discussed in this chapter come from a study into the literacy learning of the children of itinerant seasonal farm workers, who worked the winter harvesting seasons in North Queensland, Australia, and summer harvesting seasons in the southern states of New South Wales or Victoria. At the school site of the study (in North Queensland), between 40 and 60 itinerant farm workers’ children enrolled each year and stayed between one and six months. The research explored the narratives that were told by the children, their teachers and their parents about the children’s literacy learning and their apparent underachievement in school generally.

From the beginning of the research, I was mindful that, throughout history, mobile or itinerant peoples had been ostracised and persecuted as well as exoticised (Frankham, 1994; Ivatts, 2000; Kenny, 1997; Staines, 1999). Indeed, research has highlighted a frequently-occurring binary which sets residential stability and sedentarism against those “who take their home with them, instead of living in settled neighbourhoods,” with the latter often “regarded as outcasts who have no commitment, and who therefore constitute a recurring threat to the stability of those communities” (Danaher, 2000, p. 222). Because I had lived and worked in a town where farm workers arrived for the harvesting season, I was aware that the relationship between itinerant farm workers and a town’s community could be tenuous. I had heard community stories that spurned “those seasonal fruit pickers who arrive in town, steal jobs from locals and increase the crime rate” and I had heard talk, in the schools where I worked, that commented negatively on “those children who get dragged around the countryside by uneducated and uncaring parents”.

My research topic had grown out of observations that the children of itinerant farm workers were not particularly successful in school literacy learning. These observations had prompted reflection on a series of questions: Did the families’ lifestyles impact on the children’s school achievements? To what extent were the children disadvantaged by an education system that was seemingly predicated on residential stability? Could school structural and curricular issues be implicated? And what might the future hold for itinerant children when their success in school literacy learning appeared to be so limited? Such questions were embedded in social justice issues. As Gilbert (2000) argued, “[S]chool is not the same place for all Australian children and it’s important that we recognise this and see it for the problem that it is” (p. 5).

I knew, therefore, that I was setting out to examine and disrupt some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that were evident in the school community and in the town community more broadly (Burman & MacLure, 2005). I was also cognisant of the types of concerns that Thomson (2002) articulated in her research about schools in low socioeconomic areas, in particular that participants, colleagues and friends might perceive that I set out to tell stories of blame or pity (see Henderson, 2005b). Whilst these types of stories were not my intention, I was aware that multiple readings of data were possible and that not everyone might agree with the readings that I made. It was with this background knowledge – and the potential for ethical considerations – that I began to research the literacy learning of children from families who seemed to occupy marginalised positions in the township.

To collect data, I interviewed six itinerant families (parents and children) on many occasions during two consecutive harvesting seasons, observed the itinerant children in their classrooms and the playground, and interviewed school personnel and community members. 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 had to reconsider 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 – the incorporation of teachers', children's and parents' voices and the potential for participants to take up multiple and even contradictory positions (Henry-Waring, 2004) – had the potential to pit one participant against another or one group of participants against another. This raised a new set of ethical issues, which required me to consider and reconsider my responsibility to the research participants and to the audiences of my research.

Issue 1: Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity

Although confidentiality and anonymity had been guaranteed to all participants, it became clear that this was not completely possible within the school community where the data were collected. Because I had wanted particularly to consider teachers' voices alongside those of parents and children, the data collection for the study was focused around six case study families. While the use of pseudonyms provided protection against identification of the location and the participants by those outside the research, it did not ensure that one participant could not identify another. This was particularly so when I wrote descriptions of the case study families, as some families were easily recognisable by their ethnicity and other characteristics. For example, one Tongan family comprised a girl and twin boys and only one family fitted that description within the school context. Similarly, one Anglo itinerant student was regarded by teachers as one of the school's 'worst behaviour problems'. He too was easily identifiable, as were the teachers who taught him.

However, specific information that some families revealed in the later stages of data collection raised another set of ethical issues and highlighted tensions between my ethical position as a researcher and what could have been useful and important information for my research. These issues surfaced when case study families allowed me to be privy to insights that had not been offered to school personnel. In hindsight, it was apparent that the information had not been disclosed until the participants were confident that their relationship with me, the researcher, was one of trust and respect. Nevertheless, I was troubled by the sharing of family information that was not known outside a specific family. On the one hand, the information provided understandings about how particular families dealt with aspects of their itinerant lifestyles and was therefore very useful information to my research. On the other hand, my use of those insights meant that I would have been 'telling the world' information that families had deliberately kept from the community in which they were temporarily living.

In reflecting on this dilemma, I concluded that I had no choice but to go back to each of the families and let them decide how, or whether, the information would be used, as the well-being of participants – in present and future situations – could be at stake. It seemed that an ethical position was for me to be guided by the participants themselves about whether the information could be used, whether it could be filtered in such a way so as to preserve anonymity or whether it should not be used at all. In the current national guidelines (see (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007), research is "ethically acceptable only when its potential benefits justify any risks involved in the research" (p. 17). Whilst there was no doubt that the information could contribute to "gains in knowledge, insight and understanding" (p. 17) about the lives and experiences of itinerant farm worker families, my position was that the information constituted a 'risk' to the families and to their relationships with the local community. As the national guidelines stress, it is important that participants "clearly understand the risks they are assuming" (p. 18).

In some situations, families decided that they were comfortable for information to be shared with others. For example, one family, who had deliberately kept their tattoos hidden from the community, revealed their extensive body tattoos to me during an interview and talked at length about the way that people 'read' tattoos and make assumptions about those who have them. Their decision to hide the tattoos had been a deliberate move not to advertise familial practices that might have upset some of the permanent residents of the community where they were living temporarily, an action that exemplified their attempts to 'fit in' to that community. The dilemma for me 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 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." (For further information, see Henderson, 2005a.)

In other situations, I had to filter information. One family, for example, discussed information that lay on the interface between legal and illegal activity. Initially, I was told by one of the eleven-year old 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 insights 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 – in their explanation that "We know that it is wrong" – they believed it was the only option that allowed them to meet their

financial commitments (loan repayments) during the time that one parent had accompanied a sick relative to another town for medical treatment and was therefore unable to work and earn money. (For further information, see Henderson, 2005b.)

Nevertheless, whilst the family was comfortable with discussing that information with me, they were concerned about repercussions from the school. After considerable discussion about the issue, the family's initial decision was that the information could be used once the student had made the transition from primary to high school. However, despite their insistence that this was an acceptable solution, I was concerned that the family was putting my research before their own interests and that there was a possibility that repercussions might surface in the future. After further discussion about these issues, the family and I came to an agreement that the information would be filtered, thereby avoiding any links to the family at all. By using non-gendered descriptors and broad statements regarding family relationships, I was able to ensure that the student could not be identified as belonging to a particular case study family.

Issue 2: Dilemmas surrounding a polyvocal approach

The second ethical dilemma concerned my use of polyvocality as a way of reporting the voices of teachers, children and parents and offering 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. This worried me. I had invited all groups of research participants to be involved and I did not want to be seen to be taking sides or to set one group in opposition to another.

There were times when teachers' assumptions about families were based on flimsy evidence or were generalisations of a single incident. Sometimes teachers seemed to draw on what they 'imagined' life as an itinerant farm worker might be like. This may have been the case in the following interview excerpt, where the teacher suggested that a father's actions (or inactions) were responsible for the problems that the son was experiencing at school:

As soon as they start work they will have very little time to spend with him [the student], 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 I wouldn't be surprised if [the dad] just wants to have a few beers and relax when he's not working 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. (For further information, see Henderson, 2005c.)

Teachers' stories like this one – suggesting that itinerant parents had chosen lifestyle over the well-being of their children – were prevalent. However, interviews with the case study parents indicated that many families were working extremely hard to provide for their children, to balance their itinerant lifestyle with the children's education, and to try to fit into the community. (For further information, see Henderson, 2005a.) When the 'dad' named in the teacher's interview above was interviewed, there were indications that both parents were feeling concerned about their decision to be itinerant. They explained that they did not feel guilt-free:

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 contradictory. The reading ability of one student was described by one teacher positively – "His reading, oral reading was excellent, comprehension was excellent" – and by another in negative terms – "I don't think his reading was all that flash." (For further information, see Henderson, 2007.) The dilemma of these examples is that the use of such data has the potential to set one research participant in opposition to another – parent against teacher or teacher against teacher.

Whilst all texts are constructions, my concern was that I was responsible for the (re)construction of 'reality' that I would present in my doctoral thesis and in papers about my research. Therein lay ethical concerns about whether I should privilege one story over another, whether I should advocate on behalf of one group and how I could balance responsibility to multiple audiences – to the families who opened up their lives to scrutiny, to school personnel who opened up their teaching practices and classrooms to inspection and to academic audiences who would ultimately read my publications. As I collected more data, it became quite apparent that there were no easy answers to these questions.

I was probably fortunate that I had 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. This approach

allowed me to show how specific research participants tapped into particular discourses and to demonstrate the complexity of teachers' work and the multiple discourses that construct that work (Vick, 2004). In this way, I was able to show how commonsense assumptions were taken up in the school context, with the families' stories providing alternative perspectives that were not always readily available to teachers.

Conclusion

As this brief discussion has highlighted, ethical considerations played a major role in many aspects of my research, especially in relation to participant welfare, the representation of data for various audiences and the effects of these representations on relationships between research participants and the school community. The examples – one illustrating how research can make 'invisible traits' visible and therefore put relationships between stakeholders at risk, and the second demonstrating the importance of recognising that the (re)construction and (re)presentation of data are not value-free activities – demonstrated the need for extended reflection and negotiation to ensure that there were no unintended, risky or unethical consequences for research participants.

Whilst the university's ethics approval processes meant that ethical considerations were in place from the beginning of the research, this did not mean that ethics could then be forgotten. Indeed, ethical deliberations were ongoing throughout the research and required reflection about current and future effects of the research and, in a number of cases, resulted in extensive negotiation with research participants.

Whilst the ethical dilemmas highlighted some of the dangers of 'doing' educational research, they also provided a focus for thinking about research as a transformative process. Through finding ways to negotiate ethical considerations, I found that the research helped to open the way for understanding the different perspectives of teachers and parents in relation to itinerant students. In particular, the polyvocal approach enabled all research participants to see 'the story' from multiple perspectives. Additionally, this particular project has fostered further research which is considering ways of moving forward educationally. It is this ongoing work that aims to meet Luke's (2002) call for research to go beyond critique and address "the sticky matter of what educationally *is to be done*" (p. 54; *emphasis added*), thus working towards an ethical conclusion.

As this chapter has demonstrated, ethical considerations in educational research are ongoing. They need to be foregrounded and revisited regularly, especially during the collection and (re)presentation of research data. In troubling the terrains of educational research, this chapter has prompted critical reflection about research and its effects. It is through this troubling and critical reflection that the transformative potential of research is likely to be achieved.

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