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Seeking Visibility:

Action Research With Teachers of Mobile Indigenous Students

Thesis submitted by

Andrea Jane LYNCH

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Statement on the Contribution of Others

I acknowledge the intellectual support of my supervisory team, Professor Angela Hill, Associate Professor Leanne Dalley-Trim and Professor Sue McGinty, who provided ongoing contributions to my research design, proposal writing, data analysis and also editorial assistance with this thesis.

I have received financial assistance from the School of Education in accordance with the *James Cook University Minimum Resources Policy*. A grant from the James Cook University Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences’ *Graduate Research Scheme* enabled me to reimburse the participating school for teachers’ time and to attend national and international conferences. Additionally, I have received a stipend in the form of an *Australian Postgraduate Award*. I have not sought or received any other contributions.

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007). The proposed research methodology received ethics clearance from the James Cook University Ethics Review Committee (approval number H3172) and the project was approved by the Department of Education and Training (reference number 550/27/779).

______________________________  _______________________
Andrea Lynch                           Date
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Abstract

In Australia, Indigenous students’ education outcomes, as represented by assessments that accompany the current neo-liberal performativity and accountability agendas, are well below those of their non-Indigenous counterparts. While there has been a flurry of policy and rhetoric around ‘closing the gap’, one aspect of the lived experience of some Indigenous Australian Peoples – temporary mobility – goes largely ignored by education systems that, through policy and its enactment, represent schooling stability as ‘normal’. While not all mobility has a negative effect, existing research shows that when accompanied by other risk factors such as low socio-economic status, mobility can have a ‘compounding’ effect (KPMG Consulting, Australian Council for Education Research, Department of Defence, & Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training, 2002) and, when multiple school moves occur in the early years, learning is highly likely to be disrupted (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; KPMG Consulting et al., 2002; Rumberger, 2003). Indigenous mobility, as an educational issue, is largely absent from education policy and this absence, coupled with ongoing literacy policy reform in Queensland, serves to provide little guidance for teachers and schools in regional urban communities working to meet the literacy learning needs of this underserved cohort of students.

This case study was conducted as a critical participatory action research project exploring teaching practices that support the literacy learning of mobile Indigenous students. It was undertaken in a state primary school serving a regional Queensland suburban community characterised by low educational outcomes and low socio-economic status. The study formed part of a larger collaborative action research project investigating Indigenous student mobility, with a focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes, and trialling targeted interventions in 14 low socio-economic primary schools in a range of locations.
across Queensland. While the larger project actively focused on responding to the needs of mobile Indigenous students by building school capacity and engaging with the local community, this study, working in parallel, has focused sharply on the work of teachers in relation to supporting literacy learning for mobile Indigenous students. Through all phases of both research projects, an Indigenous reference group from within the Queensland Department of Education and Training provided guidance and support. Additionally, extensive consultations with Indigenous stakeholders were undertaken to ensure the research was consistent with the concerns and interests of the local community.

Over four school terms in 2009 and 2010, I facilitated a participatory action research project involving three classroom teachers working in Years 1 and 3, the school’s Community Liaison Officer, the Mobility Support Teacher and the Curriculum Coordinator. Data were gathered and generated through a range of methods including, but not limited to, professional learning activities, professional conversations within whole group meetings, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

The methodology was informed by a critical theory approach, underpinned by Habermas’ (1984, 1987, 1996) theories of knowledge constitutive interests, communicative action and the public sphere. I also drew upon the notion of ‘Disciplined Dialogue’ (Swaffield & Dempster, 2009) to ensure professional conversations retained both their focus on literacy teaching practice and on the data that were generated through the participatory action research cycle.

Data collected and generated from the project were managed through the use of QSR NVivo software. This software was used to code the collective data. Over time, as analysis progressed and patterns and ideas took shape, these were organised and reorganised into hierarchical, branching structures or ‘tree’ nodes which allowed the
researcher to organise the coding according to conceptual relationships – as one way of identifying patterns in the data.

This research identified that the practice architectures of the neoliberal state serve as a barrier to teachers’ work with mobile Indigenous students through a reduced and narrowed curriculum (Lingard, 2010) and a focus on testing as accountability (Luke & Woods, 2008) that is removed from classroom purposes. Additionally, the lack of a coherent literacy policy in Queensland marginalises this cohort of students and reduces teachers’ capacity to support their literacy learning needs. These practice architectures shape teachers’ work in ways that draw their work away from the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007a, 2007b) and provide spaces for deficit discourses and low expectations of mobile Indigenous students and their families.

Within this action research project it was found that when temporal and discursive space supported by ‘Disciplined Dialogue’ is made available, teachers and specialist support staff are able to ‘see’ local and systemic practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) and, in doing so, strategise critical place-based (Gruenewald, 2008) pedagogical responses that meet the needs of students in the school at that time. Evidence demonstrated that providing this space for praxis can serve to render visible the lived experiences of mobile Indigenous students and their families. Coming to ‘see’ mobile Indigenous students and their families can reshape aspects of teachers’ habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) and provide professional renewal and growth that has, potentially, positive impact for the literacy learning of mobile Indigenous students.
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### Acronyms and Abbreviations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACARA</td>
<td>Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Curriculum Co-ordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLO</td>
<td>Community Liaison Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPAR</td>
<td>Critical participatory action research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL</td>
<td>Essential Learnings</td>
</tr>
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<td>ESL/D</td>
<td>English as a Second Language/Dialect</td>
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<td>ICSEA</td>
<td>Index of Community Socio Economic Advantage</td>
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<tr>
<td>IEP</td>
<td>Individual Education Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEW</td>
<td>Indigenous Education Worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>Indigenous Liaison Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISSU</td>
<td>Indigenous Schooling Support Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MST</td>
<td>Mobility Support Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAPLAN</td>
<td>National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAEP</td>
<td>National Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATSIEP</td>
<td>National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAE</td>
<td>Standard Australian English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socio-economic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STLaN</td>
<td>Support Teacher: Literacy and Numeracy</td>
</tr>
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<td>TRS</td>
<td>Teacher Relief Scheme</td>
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