

**THE SOCIAL AND DISCURSIVE  
CONSTRUCTION OF ITINERANT FARM  
WORKERS' CHILDREN AS  
LITERACY LEARNERS**

Thesis submitted by

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Information derived from the published or unpublished works of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

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## **STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS**

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The doctoral research reported and presented in this thesis was conducted under the supervision of Professor Pam Gilbert (until November, 2002), Associate Professor Annette Patterson and Professor Nola Alloway from the School of Education at James Cook University.

Financial support for this research was provided by the School of Education, in the form of a scholarship with stipend.





# DECLARATION ON ETHICS

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The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics, Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001).

The research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Ethics Review Committee (Human Ethics Sub-Committee) – Approval Number H1098.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

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Using a case study approach, this study examined the social and discursive construction of itinerant farm workers' children as literacy learners within a North Queensland primary school. By focusing on six case study families who enrolled at the school during two winter harvesting seasons, the study analysed the narratives of teachers and of families in order to yield insights into the fields of educational itinerancy and literacy.

Defining literacy as a social practice, the study was framed within cultural-critical understandings of literacy, and critical discourse and poststructuralist theories. By using these to theorise the social world and literacy learning within it, the research examined the social and discursive constructions of the itinerant farm workers' children within the sociocultural contexts of the school and its local community. Drawing on Fairclough's (1989, 2001c) text-interaction-context model, the study used critical discourse analysis to conduct textual and social analyses of interview transcripts and selected documents.

The study found that teachers' narratives about itinerant farm workers' children were predominantly negative, constructing itinerant children, their families and their lifestyles in deficit and stereotypical terms. The taken-for-granted assumption that an itinerant lifestyle impacted negatively on children's literacy learning meant that teachers had low academic expectations of the children. In addition, the children's families were frequently viewed as culpable for the difficulties that their children experienced. Many of the teachers' narratives reflected community stories about farm workers and wider societal stories about families of low socio-economic status. Although there were some positive stories in circulation within both the school and community contexts, these were very much in the minority.

The families' narratives provided "another take" on the events and practices that were so often read as negative by those more permanently located in the school and community. In providing insights into what it meant to be itinerant, the families highlighted their attempts to balance education with lifestyle and to fit into the town

where they were residing temporarily. These stories demonstrated that the families' practices were often very different from the commonsense assumptions of teachers and community members.

The study concludes that a reconceptualisation of the literacy learning needs of itinerant farm workers' children should look beyond the school and take account of the social and cultural contexts of the children and their families. Such an approach should help to shift the focus away from deficits and stories of blame, towards an exploration of the literacy strengths that itinerant children bring to school. By disrupting deficit views, teachers should be better placed to focus on responsive and flexible pedagogies for enabling children to achieve demonstrable and sustainable learning outcomes in school literacy learning.

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## PUBLICATIONS

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The following published and in-press papers have been based on sections of this thesis and its data.

- Henderson, R. (2001). Student mobility: Moving beyond deficit views. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 11(1), 121-129.
- Henderson, R. (2001, July 12-15). *Moving into a new community: Itinerant fruit pickers' children and literacy learning*. Paper presented at the joint national conference of (AATE) Australian Association for the Teaching of English and (ALEA) Australian Literacy Educators' Association, Hobart. Available from <http://www.leadingliteratelives.com.au>
- Henderson, R. (2002, December 1-5). *Disrupting homogeneity: When being different is breaking school rules*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference: Problematic futures: Educational research in an era of ... uncertainty, Brisbane. Available from <http://www.aare.edu.au>
- Henderson, R. (2003). Taking heart: Looking beyond fear and blame. *Board of Teacher Registration Professional Exchange*, 10, 7.
- Henderson, R. (2003, 29 November-3 December). *Opening Pandora's Box: Ethical dilemmas in literacy research*. Paper presented at the NZARE/AARE Joint Conference: Educational risks and dilemmas, Auckland, NZ. Available from <http://www.aare.edu.au>
- Henderson, R. (2003). Living with itinerancy: Children of itinerant farm workers in Australia talk about moving and changing schools. Manuscript under review.
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- Henderson, R. (2004). Recognising difference: One of the challenges of using a multiliteracies approach? *Practically Primary*, 9(2), 11-14.
- Henderson, R. (2004). Words making a difference: What's in a name? *Practically Primary*, 9(3), 16-17.
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Henderson, R. (2005). "We'd better hide those tats": A transient family tries to fit in to school. In S. May, M. Franken & R. Barnard (Eds.), *LED2003: Refereed conference proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Language, Education and Diversity*. Hamilton, NZ: Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, University of Waikato.

Henderson, R. (in press). An invasion of green-stained farm workers from outer space(s)? Or a rural community struggling with issues of itinerancy. *Education in Rural Australia*.

Woods, A., Henderson, R., & Hirst, E. (2004). When deficit meets accountability. *WordsWorth*, 36(4), 48-51.