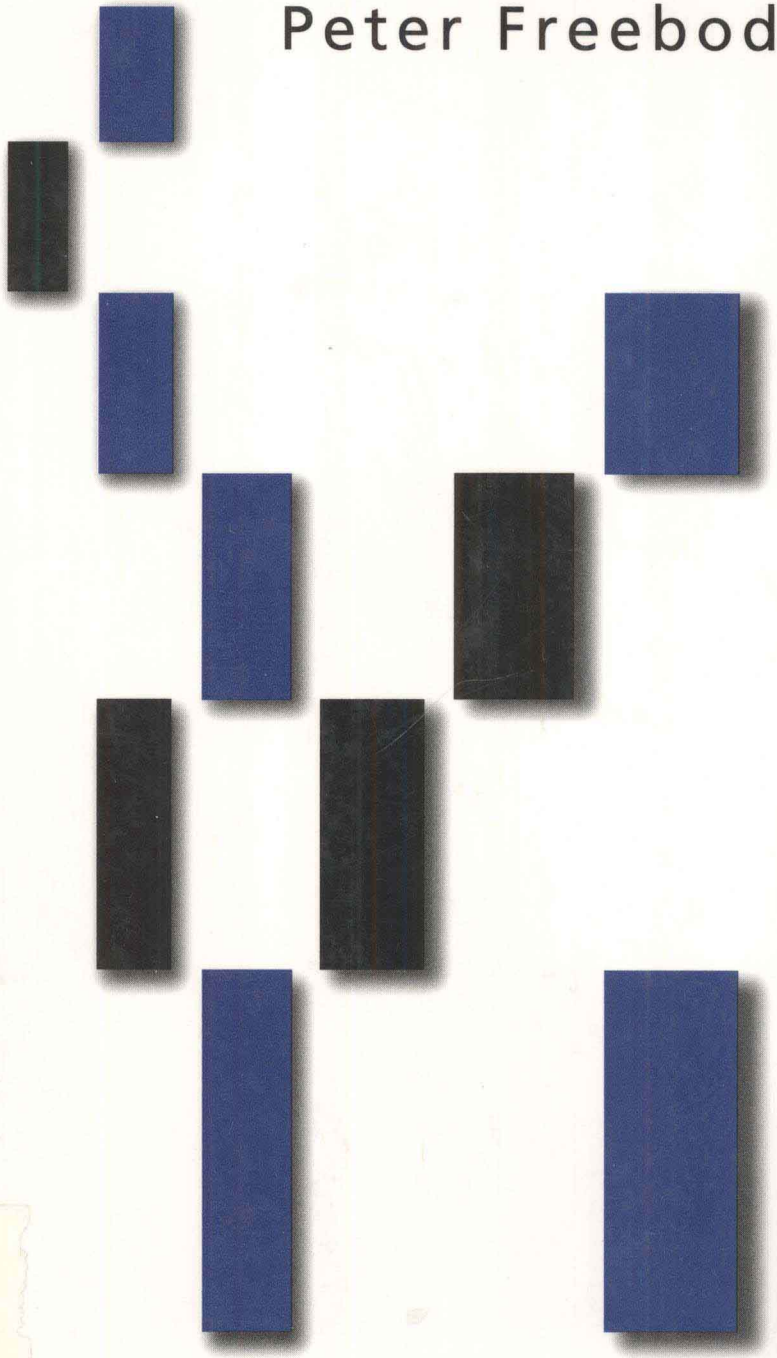
Qualitative Research in Education

Interaction and Practice

Peter Freebody

Introducing Qualitative Methods



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Preface

A book needs to locate itself in the story in which it aims to play a part. In the case of education and research, this story is long and complex. The spread of education through schooling and *as* schooling has perhaps been the singular achievement of the twentieth century. As in no other era, it became a hallmark of a contemporary society that its members believe in schooling as the embodiment of their aspirations for acculturating their young. As schooling broadened its purview, and expanded its moral, cultural and legal jurisdictions, so educational research grew apace. Researchers have both supported and contested aspects of mass schooling. Predictably enough, different modes of educational research have figured prominently at different moments and places in this growth.

The expansion of education through schooling was neither gradual nor linear. It shifted in its character, in the ways it claimed legitimation, and in how it aimed to respond to changing community, cultural and economic conditions. It intersected at various times and places with particular economic, cultural, political and ideological movements – indigenous and migrant 'assimilation' and post-colonial identity, urban industrialization, poverty alleviation, corporate management practices, citizenship training, the conservation and challenge of colonial, ethnic and national diasporas and heritage, and so on. Changing views of the role of research in education, and changing preferences for different ways of doing research relate to these shifts.

To paint in broad strokes, in the first part of the twentieth century Northern nations deployed schooling to maximize the capabilities of a workforce facing increasing demands for technical, literate and numerate competence. Schooling has been seen as an instrument of meritocracy. It has been seen as standing against the proposition, hanging over from previous centuries, that intellectual and cultural privileges are properly inherited. These nations invested more in schooling after 1950, in part because the enterprise of schooling became to be seen as a central platform for national and community development. At first these developments were built around a common public vocabulary: Keynesian accounts of economic growth and national accounts; state-sponsored collective bargaining in and about public institutions; sociological accounts of social inequalities; cultural investment; and the rhetoric of egalitarian and redistributive welfare systems. This is the period in which educational researchers began to draw in greater numbers on anthropologically-styled qualitative research accounts, as more of their readership and their trainees were exposed to ever-broader ranges of liberal arts studies as part of their preparation for teaching.

By the late 1970s, with the sharp decline in projections of economic growth and the beginnings of globalized capital and human movements, this common vocabulary seemed little more than a quaint minority creole in many debates about education and other public provisions. The prime functions of school had been revisited. The vocabulary of performance-measurement, competition-for-resources, and corporate, managerial accountability was increasingly applied to those institutions that were once more explicitly charged with meritocratic versions of equity and redistribution. Management through quantification provided, in many nations and education systems, the high-discourse of debate and research. Through these times schooling was installed as a lever for 'development' for those Southern nations coming out of European colonial administration. Many of these societies adapted the logics and regulatory practices developed in Northern nations to a variety of local imperatives.

This meant that, by the end of the 1900s, much of what people knew about and did by way of everyday educational activity was in danger of being written out of the considerations of educators. So self-sustaining did the managerial bases of schooling seem, so comprehensive and rarely challenged the separation of the social, intellectual, moral and ideological meanings and materials of schools from those of the everyday activities of the communities they purported to serve, that entire communities could, without irony, be described as 'failing at education' – as bizarre a notion as imaginable from a cultural perspective on education. As some put it, while the people can dismiss governments in the modern democracies, 'education' is the administrative retaliation: through schooling, governments can now dismiss the people. Some qualitative researchers reacted 'anthropologically' to that, exploring these out-of-school everyday activities, and providing non-schooled ways of thinking about them. The examples in this book aim to reflect some of these interests.

The developments outlined above have all been contested in a variety of ways. Their hold has remained at best provisional, partly because of the diversity of the research that has been taken to inform schooling. Some of the more evident reasons for the recent reinvigoration of qualitative approaches to researching education include:

1. a dissatisfaction with limitations on the capacities of conventional, quantitative research to describe educational events;
2. a perception, not always warranted, that quantitative representations of educational activities are only the instruments of governmental administration, rather than valuable sources of knowledge for educators;
3. growing incursions, from the 1980s on, of sociology, linguistics and anthropology into educational research; and
4. the development over time of more precise and informative analytic methods associated with qualitative approaches.

Along with the many others with similar focus, this book inhabits its own particular time and place in this history in these developments. It reflects my

continued interest in documenting observations in ways that are at the one time conceptually informative, professionally useful and ideologically productive.

Trained as an educational statistician, I have often used quantitative analytic methods to explore patterns of capabilities, expressions of beliefs, and the linguistic and cultural features of educational texts. But long ago circumstances 'led me on', as it were. My early contacts with educational research occurred at about the same time as my first teaching job, and continued when I found myself asked to give 'advice-based-on-research' to teachers and at times to educational administrators and policy makers. It was these experiences that led me to consider what kinds of research could enjoy some theoretical integrity as well as have an impact on how educators thought about and conducted their work. Initially, like many with my early training, I considered qualitative methods speculative, provisional, useful as back-ups, supplements and opportunities to give support to the 'real findings' (generally, the statistics) through more 'in-depth' reflections. Gradually I came to see that an understanding of the more sophisticated forms of qualitative analysis offers a distinctive way of knowing and theorizing about educational and social practices and structures, and thus can make distinctive contributions to educational knowledge and debate.

I came to these understandings not solely because of the intellectual satisfaction derived from engagement in the details of educational events – the pleasurable shock of the familiar – but also because of exposure to the considerable bodies of knowledge accumulated through qualitative inquiry. This knowledge, the result of systematic work by researchers across a range of fields bearing on education, is about methods of analysis, the general conduct of research, and the nature of educational and cultural activities. The status of this knowledge and of our understanding of the nature and outcomes of qualitative analyses mean that qualitative approaches to research in education are no longer, if they ever were, speculative or provisional, certainly no more so than other forms of social inquiry.

The centrepiece of this book is a set of qualitative analytic methods for studying educational events and accounts of those events. The most obvious problem in presenting these methods is to find coherent ways through the variety of professional, theoretical and ideological traditions that currently both shape and divide the field of educational research. Needless to say, it is not possible to find methods that have broad consensus across the disciplines and positions contesting the field. There is, therefore, much that many educational researchers will disagree with, or at least find to be short-changed in the approaches I have taken here. This diversity of analytic investment is simply what experienced and novice researchers alike must recognize.

But it takes four chapters to get to this centrepiece. This is because I found that the less obvious task for such a project is to frame analytic methods in terms of some version of the field that they hope to inform: What are the boundaries of the activities that will count as 'educational' for this book, here and now? Can this work be about schooling, and more than schooling? In addressing these

questions, we find that any contribution to educational research needs to display some sense of the contested terrain in which it appears, those assumptions, understandings and debates that traverse educational work about the place of research. Among these are the categories that locate the methods at hand. In this case, I have put these methods forward as 'qualitative', a descriptor that derives its sense from a contrast with 'quantitative'. As I try to show later, this contrast may be a good place to start, but it does not prove to be particularly fruitful when we consider how we can actually work with educational data. There are more significant conceptual and practical polarities and dialectics at stake.

The danger with 'methods' books is that the methods are presented for application as stand-alone procedures, apparently independent of the conceptual and practical issues that arise from studying the actual sites of the events under study. Offsetting that danger is one of the important goals of the first few chapters: there I provide the 'take' on education, research and qualitative approaches in terms of which the subsequent chapters can be read. I expand on the view that what is central to productive research is an organic and explicitly understood relationship between conceptual interests, analytic methods and methodological design. Each of itself cannot secure the productivity of a research project; it is rather their interplay in practice that can generate refined theory and analysis, and more professionally fulfilling practice. That is to say, this book approaches qualitative methods in education by taking the time to stalk them, trying to track them down and corral them into a position in which they can be seen as more than procedural guidelines. For researchers, methods need to be generative of significant reflection, not just equipment for producing conclusions.

There are some conceptual, collegial and material debts to be acknowledged. The book can be seen as an extended set of variations of a few key themes. First is the proposition that the mundane, generally unnoticed interactions associated with educational practices are more than static accompaniments, and that, indeed, they constitute those practices and make them recognizably 'educational'. The idea that the apparent untidiness, disorderliness and disarray of ordinary everyday interaction not only can be, but should be studied systematically was articulated in the 1960s by Sacks (1992). He was one of the first social scientists to take seriously the usually unremarked but highly remarkable ways in which people conduct their everyday business through talk. In pursuing that interest, he developed 'the distinctive and utterly critical recognition . . . that the talk can be examined as an object in its own right, and not merely as a screen on which are projected other processes' (Schegloff, 1995: xviii).

A proposition that takes this idea further is also central to the chapters that follow. This concerns the heuristic and programmatic idea that everyday interaction weaves and re-weaves social order. Dimensions of that order, including the 'big' sociological categorizations we commonly use to describe social and cultural experience – socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, race, religion and so on – are built by people's everyday concerted activities; they do not provide

us with the determinants or ready-made explanations or of those activities. As Schegloff pointed out:

> The point is not that persons are somehow *not* male or female, upper or lower class, with or without power, professors and/or students. They may be, on some occasion, demonstrably members of one or another of those categories. Nor is the issue that those aspects of the society do not matter, or did not matter on that occasion. We may share a lively sense that indeed they do matter, and that they mattered on that occasion, and mattered for just that aspect of some interaction on which we are focusing. There is still the problem of *showing from the details of the talk or other conduct in the materials* that we are analyzing that those aspects of the scene are what the parties are oriented to. *For that is to show how the parties are embodying for one another the relevancies of the interaction and are thereby producing the social structure.* (Schegloff, 1991: 51, emphases in original)

In Dorothy E. Smith's terms, we need to be clear what we mean when we say that we study education as a category of social activity: we mean that we are focusing on 'the ongoing concerting and coordinating of individuals' activities . . . people's ever-to-be-renewed coordinating of their activities' (1999: 6).

These two propositions taken together – that social activity can be studied in principled ways, and that this study can show how people accomplish the 'social facts' by which they give order and consequentiality to their experiences – are central ideas that motivate this book. I hope to show that the analytic and interpretive discipline that these ideas call for is at the same time a way out of some of the more bland, circular and unproductive ways of talking about education that are commonplace in the research community.

An additional idea central to this book is that educational research is a site of contestation over:

- the activities that count normatively as 'educational';
- the language by which educational problems and solutions are represented;
- the nature of the social relations that are embodied in educational practice, including the organizational practices by which institutionalized education is administered;
- the community practices by which educational activities are given public credibility; and
- the research practices through which education can be and should be studied.

As each of these contests is acted out and re-displayed in project after project, a particular configuration of positions is re-installed, re-legitimated and again made available for the reader. These positions affect what we can know and how we can think and talk about the context, goals and consequences of education, the cultural and political orders of social life, the nature and consequences of research texts, and the continued conduct and purposes of educational research.

Acknowledgements

The approaches I outline in this book have been influenced to differing degrees and in different settings by the work of James Heap, John Heritage, the late Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff and Dorothy E. Smith. More immediately, Carolyn Baker and Brian Street have provided me with genial apprenticeships in understanding how talk and cultural practices can be described. But when it comes to learning about the conduct of qualitative research and clarifying ways of talking about it, there is nothing more engaging and educative than working with graduate research students. Many of these students have become valued colleagues, foremost among them Helena Austin, Ann Czislowski-McKenna, Bronwyn Dwyer and Jill Freiberg. As they came to master these methods themselves, these people taught me a lot about how to apply them, and kept showing me why they matter.

Three people deserve special thanks for material support they gave to the development of this book: Geraldine Castleton provided valuable help on the chapter concerning methodologies; Robert Campbell skilfully first-drafted most of the exercises provided at the end of each chapter and pursued wayward references; and most importantly David Silverman suggested this book in the first place while I was quietly minding my own business. David provided patient and friendly encouragement at key stages, and I thank him for the time he devoted to this project and for allowing me to draw on his conspicuous expertise.

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Contents

1

Education as Social and Cultural Practice

Educational research is a more intellectually and professionally challenging field than most. The challenges for the researcher arise from at least four aspects of education: first, the importance of education is rarely denied. The last century, whatever else it may have been, was certainly the century of schooling. In the West, governments and communities have invested more and more faith in education to solve ever larger and more entrenched social problems. In developing nations, education is often regarded as a privilege and a prize, and many studies show that the simple number of years a young person spends in formal educational settings is a powerful predictor of, among other things, how long they and their children will live (Summers, 1994). So education matters.

Second, educational activities are inherently complex and dynamic, both in the local settings in which they occur and, beyond those sites, as part of a society's publicly co-ordinated activities. With changes in the socio-cultural make-up of the participants within the boundaries of an educational site (say, a family, school or state), we observe changes in the qualities of educational goals, outcomes and processes. So the practices that we term 'educational' are always debatable, always changing and thus always objects of contestation. Research has played a significant part in those contests.

Third, education matured comparatively late as an institutionalized academic research area and thus has spent some decades drawing its conceptual and methodological sustenance from neighbouring social disciplines, in particular Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, History, Economics and Philosophy. The methods evident in contemporary educational research display features of work in these disciplines, often in combinations, as do the reasoning practices those methods support.

Fourth, while many equate 'education' with 'institutionalized education', most obviously with 'schooling', it is nonetheless the case that just as much

education goes on informally, outside the school, college or university grounds as inside. Further, when we consider the ways people learn and are taught, it becomes clear that the forms of knowledge and inquiry that people encounter across the range of their family, community and institutional experiences impact on one another in important ways.

Partly as a result of the combination of these factors, educational research is probably a more multi-faceted and almost certainly a more contested and fractious field than most comparable research domains. In this book I introduce a collection of qualitative methods that are in use in contemporary educational research. This collection is not random, nor is it a 'best of' selection of the most popular methods. Rather, it represents ways of putting to productive work a selection of techniques bound loosely by a shared appreciation of educational practice as fundamentally social and cultural in nature. It represents as well a programme for viewing competing ways of theorizing about education, research and the nature of evidence.

Put bluntly, the book has a position on education and research: in many countries, an individual's education in school is legally mandated. The sentence is usually ten to twelve years; so there is no sense in pretending that studying education allows values, norms or ideological positions to be set aside, however temporarily. How individuals emerge from their formal acculturation into particular ways of knowing and behaving is not something that most societies leave to chance. The first known law making schooling compulsory, passed in 1647, was called the Olde Deluder Satan Law. In that law the Puritan communities of North America required every town of 50 or more families to hire a reading and writing teacher, to 'outwit' the ways of the Evil One by education. Since then, virtually every Education Act has justified itself through the rhetoric of moral, economic and social well-being. So for the researcher, being principled and disciplined is not the same as being neutral on matters of education. At the same time, matters of value are as much the objects of inquiry as are the practices they inform.

In this chapter I open the discussion by exploring the nature of educational practice and the distinctive part that qualitative research has played and can play in educational work. But first, some scene-setting.

Preview scenes

Before beginning to define education and proceeding to discuss how it is that research has had and can have impact on its conduct, we first consider a number of everyday scenes. We begin here because it is through everyday participation in ordinary activities that members of the society encounter this practical activity called 'education'.

Scene 1.1 A mother has been sitting for a few minutes reading a Roald Dahl book with her seven-year old child. Nearby is a younger brother starting to set up for a drawing activity on the carpet.

M Well, that's the title up here is HOW TO BE LITTLE RAY OF SUNSHINE AND MAKE EVERYONE ELSE IN THE HOUSE FEEL LIKE VOMITING. That is ((raised voice)) would you please take that pen out . . . you're not to write in here. And ((brother leaves, very loud voice)) you can go and look for your socks. I told you they are on the bed, in your room somewhere, on the bed or ((extremely loud voice)) on the floor. I put some socks in your room last night. Blue ones.

C ((reading)) FOR HOURS BEFORE THE DOCTOR COMES EVEN THROUGH//

M //Did you read this title?

C No, because I can't read it

M Okay. HOW TO BE AN that word is OBNOXIOUS INVALID. Do you know what that means? Do you know what 'obnoxious' means? Totally horrible. What's an invalid?

C I don't know.

M A sick person. So when you're sick, how to be totally horrible

C ( ) FOR HOURS BEFORE THE DOCTOR COMES EVEN ( ) KNOWS VERY WELL YOU DON'T HAVE TO HAVE AN INJECTION ((noise [sock-searching?] is building up dramatically in the background))

M ((mock threatening)) Do you know what blood is?

C No::o ((sing-song))

M ((telephone rings)) I think we'll have to stop now

A scene such as a mother helping a young child with reading is highly familiar to us. In spite of the brevity and familiarity of the scene, however, we can note a number of features. For example, we can see the satirical and iconoclastic contents of the reading materials as a statement about the kinds of things that children find enjoyable and possibly a little 'naughty'. Our everyday theories about children (see Jenks, 1982, 1989) come to the fore here when we consider the fact that authors such as Dahl have achieved widespread popularity among children, in spite of the first-glance unpalatable nature of the contents of these stories, and thus their ambiguous status as reading materials 'for children'.

As well, we can see in this excerpt the ways in which Mother attempted to help the child learn to read, and how she responded when she found that the child did not know words on the page. Again, here, the unremarkability of these activities attests to its common-sensical availability in our culture as a way of teaching reading. We may also consider that the mother's valiant attempts to engage in the reading activity with the child during a heavy-traffic time of day attests to the significance given to literacy capabilities and their development in young children. If we look more closely, we can see how it is that this little event, however long or successful it was, was jointly produced by two individuals co-ordinating their activities. In this case, this co-ordination is visible right down

to the child's mock-naïve assertion that, along with two previous 'don't know' answers to questions, he says 'no' to the question about blood. This allows Mother to have her quiet joke about the rowdy and persistent sibling, and to signal the impending termination (perhaps mercifully for both) of the reading event.

Scene 1.2 A parent is having a discussion with an interviewer from a university about her son Tom's apparently unsatisfactory progress in reading at school.

R Do you talk with Tom's teacher?

M Yeh. I first went to, I was called in for an interview and I had teacher parent interview on how, parent interview, on 'how your child is progressing' ((pseudo-formal voice)) and I found that before, like, when Tom started school at the beginning of the year, I found that the way he was learning how to read was a real problem with me. I mean, when I was going to school it was, like, repetition of 'a' is for 'apple', and you always knew what 'a' was. Whereas they didn't do the same, and when I went over there to see them about it, like, when we had the parent-and-teacher sort of thing, her and I actually had a really big talk, well it actually turned out to be a bit of debate about this, the way they're being taught, but then I sort of stayed right out of it, because I had my own views and I can't see the way they're being taught now is helping them in any way. So I've tried to stay away from the teaching, because my views are either old or they don't want to hear about it, and I can't help him at home.

This mother did not just speak as the biological parent of Tom, but also, perhaps more so in this setting, as a parent with responsibilities to supplement the work done in the formal setting of the school. When she indicated that the ways in which current reading lessons were being conducted became a 'problem' for her, she spoke as a parent who wished to help with Tom's reading at home, as we find out at the end of the statement. Her comments, therefore, were not mainly about Tom, but about her own role as a 'parent-educator' and the ways in which she felt that her actions in that role had been subordinated to the practices that Tom encountered in school. We can see the nomination of herself as the less-expert adjunct to the school's activity in her closing remarks in this statement, but we can also see indications in two small corrections that she made at the opening of her statement: 'I first went to, I was called in for . . .'; 'I had a teacher parent interview on how, parent interview, on 'how . . .'. In both of these corrections she realigned herself as a parent-from-the-school's-perspective, right down to naming the interview as a 'parent interview', even though she herself, as speaker, was the parent.

But the main point of interest for this speaker was her view that her own understanding of how she could help as an educator in the home with Tom's reading had been disqualified in the course of the 'debate' that she had with the teacher. Clearly, the mother expressed strong disagreement with the way in

which Tom was being taught. But why did this lead her to 'stay away from the teaching' and to the conclusion that 'I can't help him at home'? In terms of Tom's education as a reader, this parent's statements make visible her understanding of the relative proprietal rights of the home and the school, at least on the matter of reading instruction.

Scene 1.3 A page from a book produced for use in beginning reading classes for young students, with the facing picture showing a coloured line drawing of children and a dog frolicking around a male adult who is hosing a car in the sunshine.

'Please will you hose me?' said Mark.
Father hosed Helen and Mark.
'Please will you hose me?' barked Boxer.
Father hosed Boxer too.

(from Baker and Freebody, 1989)

Beginning reading books are written partly to help students learn to read. To do that, they usually try to interest and amuse students as well. We can consider how the writer of this text inserts a version of the reader into the social world, and how the child-reader (or 'beginning reader' – sometimes these texts have been used to teach adults to read) needs to know about and go along with that version. Children know that, apart from in books written for them, pets can neither talk nor 'bark' in words. The teacher using the book knows that too. So the assumption of the writer is *not* that this text will deceive children into believing that they do: if the writer thought children *did* believe that pets talk, then the story would lose its playful value. But further, the child-reader who finds the text amusing does so *not* by believing that pets can talk, or by believing that the writer believes they can. The amusement must arise from the child's appreciation that the writer is *playing with an idea that adults have about children, and is using that idea to motivate the learning.* So the text is not only for children, or even about children, but rather about children-not-being-altogether-like-adults, children-being-students, and children knowing what adults think about that. The child plays Child for the Adult in and by the act of appropriately reading, and maybe being amused by this text.

Our common sense and most of our formal scientific descriptions of how to educate children do not usually recognize the understandings they need to employ to bring off apparently simple dealings with adults – in the case above, understandings about little stories about talking dogs. The child-reader may learn a number of things about becoming educated when a teacher uses a text like the one above, but among those things is participating in adults' definitions about children.

Scene 1.4 Pa's speech from *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.

> Looky here – you drop that school, you hear? I'll learn people to bring up a boy to put on airs over his own father and let on to be better'n what he is. You lemme catch you fooling around that school again, you hear? Your mother couldn't read, and she couldn't write, nuther, before she died. None of the family couldn't, before they died. I can't; and here you're a-swelling yourself up like this. I ain't the man to stand it – you hear?

Here is an educated man, the author, portraying the outrage of an uneducated man in the face of his son's involvement in school. This character is portrayed as equating his son's schooling with the putting on of 'airs' and 'a-swelling' himself up. He is shown as resisting his son's education on the grounds that none of the family could read and, furthermore, that schooling would not only lead to the putting on of airs but, more critically, to the putting on of airs 'over his own father'.

While most of the rhetoric surrounding education is couched in the positive terms of human development and the acquisition of skills, there is no doubt that education, as it is practised in most countries, is partly about the explicit production of a generation that is different from the previous generation in its knowledge, skills and attitudes. In contrast to the 'private-tutor' models employed in the past in some aristocratic and ruling classes, and in contrast to the 'enculturation-by-increasing-participation' models in many traditional societies, modern schooling gauges its success in terms of the difference it can create between the generations. This is not lost for a moment on the children and families from traditional indigenous, migrant or other subcultures who attend modern, state-regulated schools.

But the character of the father, as Twain presents him here, is an object of fun, perhaps sympathetic fun, but fun nonetheless. He presents the hard choice that the central character of the story faces; but, to the educated reader for whom the book was written, he is simply an unquestionably risible expression of the undesirable past of the uneducated classes, a past from which schooling can rescue them – a secular version of the sentiment expressed in the Olde Deluder Satan Law.

Scene 1.5 From the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels.

> The bourgeois claptrap about the family and education, about the hallowed relationship of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of modern industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.