

A GLIMPSE AT SOME ISOLATED SCHOOLS IN NORTHERN SCOTLAND

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In December 1991, I was lucky enough to visit Scotland and spend time in a variety of schools in the rural area of Gordon. This is an education region north west of Aberdeen which includes a number of small schools and is part of the Grampian region.

My first stop was Inch Primary School, which has 244 children from 166 families. The quota of teachers is based on the number of pupils in the School and consists of nine classroom teachers plus specialists in the following areas:

Remedial
Art
Music

Physical Education
Home Economics
Drama

Eighty of the children travel in from outlying areas on transport provided by the school. All of these children must have special emergency arrangements for snow problems. The children are allocated to an emergency family in the village of Inch, many of the teachers help out in this way as well. If unfavourable conditions occur then the children go to their emergency family, staying overnight if necessary. With these arrangements the school is only closed one or two days each winter.

My next visit was to Oyne Primary School, a two teacher school with twenty one children. A second teacher is appointed to a school when enrolments exceed nineteen.

All the children attending Oyne School come from the village, or close by, and they walk to school or travel by car. The school is situated on the main road to Aberdeen and this ensures access to the school is maintained, even in the harshest winter.

The school has flexible grouping, according to the needs of topics being taught and the children in the school. The two teachers interchange for various subjects offerings.

The school is part of a cluster group and much planning is done with members of the cluster. The cluster is made up of 4 small schools who meet together as often as possible.

Other small schools I visited were Clatt and Lumsden. Clatt is a one teacher school with eighteen pupils and a part-time teacher which allows the teaching Principal to utilise eighty days of relief from teaching. The majority of the pupils of this school have to travel to school as it is in a particularly isolated part of the Highlands. The children are often sent home early and the school is frequently closed because of the wild conditions. The school now has access to a snow plough to assist with keeping the school open.

Lumsden, on the other hand has twenty-three pupils, two teachers and all children live in the village. So there is no problem with being cut off or isolated. This village has a number of young families and the school provides facilities for a mother and toddler group to meet.

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All the small schools I visited were within close proximity to each other, but maintained their own unique approach. Each school has their own community and spoke of parent interaction and support. There is no system of Distance Education in Scotland so all children must be provided with access to a school.

I also visited two larger primary schools, Kemnay and Strathburn. Kemnay is similar in size to Inch and is a feeder school for the local high school. This school works on a fully integrated day within each classroom. The teachers are given preparation time each day - 8.45 am to 9.15 am and 2.45 pm to 3.30 pm. The school is also part of a cluster with three other small schools.

Strathburn is on the outskirts of Aberdeen and is very much an urban primary school. The school has three hundred and seventy children, with fourteen full-time classroom teachers. There are three schools in this area, but many of the children bypass other schools to attend Strathburn. There is a very active parent association and much parent involvement in school activities. In this school, as in all the primary schools I visited, it was evident that the Scottish people place great importance on the education of their children. Parents are proud of the School achievements and happy to be involved in the situation.

I visited one Secondary School in this area, Kemnay Academy. A School with five hundred and seventy pupils and fifty staff (thirty eight full time). The majority of pupils come from the three feeder schools and if they live beyond two miles are provided with free transport, as long as they do not pass another Secondary School on the journey.

In the first two years at this school all students follow a common curriculum with the only choice being between French or German. The next two years have a core curriculum and a choice of a number of subjects. It is possible for students to exit at the end of year 4 but many students return and the retention rates are approximately 70%. Those who do leave are employed in rural areas. The school has very few who leave and are unemployed. Again the evidence of parental involvement and interest in education came through my discussion with the Principal.

During my time in Scotland I was able to visit a teacher education institution and also speak with newly appointed graduates at two of the Schools. All full time pre-service courses are four years towards a Bachelor of Education Degree or a 4 year degree plus a postgraduate year which is a 36 week term, with 16 weeks in schools.

Preparation for teaching in rural areas does not appear to be offered to many students. In the one year course no work on multigrade teaching is part of the course-work, although some practicum may be completed in a multigrade setting. In the four year course one practicum can be completed in a rural setting, but this is optional. No course work is offered on rural settings or multigrade teaching and practicum in rural schools is not supervised by the institution.

How then do graduates become employed in the rural schools of Scotland? Graduates apply to the region of their choice and the employing authorities consider their application on their background, academic and practicum record and where they completed the practicum. It would appear that graduates with rural backgrounds are employed in rural schools.

Teachers are encouraged to participate in in-service and further their studies. Postgraduate courses are offered in the distance education mode by various Universities. Teachers are given time off and relief cover to attend residential schools and in-service courses, these are not held in vacation periods. Yet another example of the value given to education in Scotland.

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to these rural schools, broadening my knowledge of methods to approach isolation. Many of these schools are isolated in a different way to schools in Australia, but they face the same outcomes. I believe their strength lies in committed teachers, parental support and the value placed on education by all members of the Scottish community.

CHARLES STURT

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Further information about the course and eligibility for entry into the course can be obtained by writing to: the Course Coordinator, Bachelor of Education (Primary/Early Childhood), School of Education, Charles Sturt University-Riverina, P.O. Box 588 Wagga Wagga 2650.