

BEGINNER'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

Beginning teachers have been subjected to intense scrutiny. The typical focus has been on the professional problems they encounter in their first year of teaching, usually determined by large-scale surveys using a questionnaire in which the range of possible problems has already been identified. Situational studies where beginning teachers identify and delineate their own concerns are far less common but are potentially richer and more meaningful in what they reveal. Studies of beginning teachers in rural and remote areas of Australia are rare.

Reported here are the experiences of one beginning teacher appointed to a remote area school in an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. His experiences, although expressed more forcefully than most, are not unique. They capture the essence of cultural and environmental dislocation which many new teachers encounter. The reconstruction covers the period from the system-level and regional-level induction in the week prior to the commencement of the school year to the induction recall period held regionally at the end of the first teaching quarter. Induction recall in the Northern Territory applies to teachers in Aboriginal schools only.

INTRODUCTION

We met Bill at the induction course in Darwin. Katy, my research assistant, and I had gone there to recruit a small number of teachers newly appointed to the Northern Territory Department of Education who were prepared to record and talk about their experiences. Bill was among the first to volunteer.

We got to know something about Bill during that induction week. He told us that he had lived in big cities all his life, left school early, and worked in factories in Sydney for eighteen years before deciding to become a teacher. His first choice had been industrial arts but, when he talked to teacher educators in that area, they 'just sort of looked at me and laughed and said, "Go away. You've got no hope". So he chose primary teaching instead. Life at college was enjoyable, but job opportunities had dried up by the time he graduated:

The only place I would have got a job would have been in some sort of really small community in the back blocks of New South Wales. Well, I thought, if I'm going to go out bush, I may as well go away and do something different. Anyway, when I applied for here, I put 'an Aboriginal community as far north as possible'. So, they ring up and say 'There's a place. We've got one in the Katherine region.' I sort of looked at the map and thought, oh yeah, that looks not too far from Darwin. Then they told me the name, and I looked at the map: Where is it? So, five hundred kilometres from Katherine ... I just wanted to get out of Sydney for a while!

While Bill had some reservations about the adequacy of his training and his lack of contact with Aboriginal people, he was looking forward to the 'chance for some adventure' and to learning from his students. His greatest fears were loneliness and his failing as a teacher, but his school would make up for all these shortcomings:

I imagine the staff to be very close knit and cooperative. This will be due to the isolation. I am not expecting the facilities to be that of urban schools mainly because of the lack of fund raising opportunities. I feel the teaching conditions

will be harsher because of the lack of facilities and climate, but this will be compensated for through the friendship within the school staff and students.

The Katherine component of Bill's induction removed his concerns about the facilities but had introduced other doubts:

I wanted to come here to teach in an Aboriginal school and learn about their culture and hopefully contribute something to them, but now ... I think it will be more a case of survival. Then, everything else, education and socialising, will follow on from that.

The reality of his decision hit hard before he left Katherine and we pick up the story from the journal we asked Bill to keep for us:

Thursday 25 January: *Up until now the worry of eating was solved by walking to a shop and buying some food. Now, with the approach of moving and having access to supplies once a week is weighing on my mind. All of the other affairs have been dealt with (almost all). Now comes the time to buy supplies that are important to my survival.*

Sunday 28 January: *Well, I have been [here] for more than 24 hours and the shock hasn't worn off. There is very little that can prepare a city slicker for the feeling of complete helplessness. I began to realise this when flying down the vast expanse of open land, then [this place].*

Sunday 4 February: *I have been here a week and I survived the first week's school. Amazingly, it is when I am in class that there are less thoughts of running away. The trouble is I can't run away. My things haven't arrived yet. So I will have to wait before I can escape. Sounds terrible doesn't it. Well at times it is. Sitting in an empty house with a walkman trying to prepare the next day's lessons. Waking in the morning at 6.30, you put your feet on the ground to feel the fine red dust greet you (the house is always covered in a thin film of red dust), then as you walk to school your company are hundreds of flies that seem like they have velcro on their feet.*

The kids in class are good except for one, which is always the case wherever you go. The trouble with the class is the variety of ages and the varying academic levels, which does not correspond to their ages.

On Wednesday ... I went on the bus in the afternoon to ... see how the kids live. This shocked me. I have seen it on TV in other countries, but to be there and feel and smell the community scares me. The question I came here with was 'Do you teach the Aboriginal children to live within their culture and community or have them compete with European standards?'. The only way to go is integration while preserving their history. Their culture has been so corrupted that trying to keep it leaves them as second class citizens living in third world conditions. The transition will be on a long time frame as the young generation receive education and achieve some goals then their expectations for their children will be raised.

*It is when I came home that I question 'What the f*** am I doing here?'*

Then I try and take my mind off the depressing thoughts and attempt to do something positive:

write letters

prepare work

play a tape (only 3 at present - getting to know them very well

read a book (John Irving's latest - a sad novel)

Some highlights apart from teaching are receiving mail, getting groceries, and then Friday night at the bar. Also, I got a dog on Thursday which has kept me occupied. ...

Boy, am I looking forward to my car and goodies turning up this week. When that arrives I will have things that will make life more comfortable. I've heard stories of people moving to places and their gear didn't reach them for a few months. How did they cope? I want my luxuries.

I am still finding it difficult to adjust. There is nothing I am used to. Everyone I know is in Sydney. Though all the people here are very friendly and welcoming, the heart strings still create loneliness. I have an urge to see them but knowing that it is impossible hurts. I can see that it may be easier for a couple or a family, because, being single, talking to myself drives me crazy.

Red f***** dust!

F***** red dust!

I will scream only once.

[Week 3] Wednesday, 14 February: It's been a while since I wrote anything here. I have spent a fortune on stamps. Still not a day has passed without asking the question: 'What am I doing here?'. And there have been moments of depression, sitting and looking at the wall.

Motivation is essential. Depression saps this. Then it becomes a hard slog. There are highlights when the kids at school are really good.

I feel like a square peg in a round hole. Then these feelings apply to all in new places.

All my gear has turned up. This has made life much better. But now the place is in a mess

More red dust

Organising shopping lists for the next week's groceries - no little luxuries

Hot and sweaty

Getting the colds from all the kids

No smoking in school buildings ...

SW radio that fades in and out

Gee, it's fun! But all the people are friendly and very helpful.

Went to cricket practice this arvo ... I fell over and twisted my knee. It hurts. No doctor! Only a nurse who gives me a bandage, liniment, and pain killers, and says 'If it hurts next week, we will arrange to see a doctor'.

Do I have any more complaints? Yes! Red Dust! Getting used to the taste.

Although comforted by the arrival of all his possessions, Bill still did not settle in. His knee continued to trouble him and he was headed towards a personal crisis, brought on by the need to submit his program at the end of his third week of teaching and by thoughts of his first probation panel. The first hint of his crisis came on the Wednesday before his program was due:

The topic of programming is difficult for first year outs. And being ... mature age [I] find it harder due to the lack of practice from being away from school for so long and becoming lazy. [Wednesday 14 February]

By the following evening, this had become a serious concern:

My program is due tomorrow. I don't think it is acceptable. My knee hurts (excuse). Well, at least it is a sort of an outline. I can build on it. ... I hope my program (Ha Ha) doesn't get thrown in my face. I just need some help. We did nothing about programming at college. [Thursday 15 February]

And the sense of crisis continued to build as the deadline passed:

Slackness has taken over. I have not finished my program. Instead of doing that on Saturday, I cleaned the house. I am sick of this red dust. I have dedicated today to the program. Let's see what happens. I am easily distracted. My knee is getting better: ice packs every night. All my energy has been in letter writing to my girl friend. I really miss everyone. It is lonely here. Being lonely makes me depressed and depression leads to lack of motivation and slackness. Help!
[Sunday 18 February]

Sunday having passed and still no program, he decided that he had better talk to the principal about it, which he did on Monday, immediately after school had finished:

I asked for help which she gave me but when I tried to explain why I had not done it properly she said to pull my finger out and get motivated when all I wanted was some encouragement. I tried to explain my difficulty coming here and being lonely, depressed and lack of motivation, but it fell on deaf ears. Just what I didn't want. I thought I was supposed to get support. It is hard enough trying to survive. Define survive: day to day living, cooking, cleaning, and relaxation, which is necessary in an isolated community which has no easy access to what most people are used to. Boy do I complain. [Monday 19 February]

Bill's desperation continued to increase and began to affect his work in class. On the day following his unfortunate interview with his principal, he wrote:

I had a shit day! One completely stuffed Maths lesson can ruin anyone's day. The kids went crazy. Sometimes they are hard to control. Well this is what I should have expected. But when it happens it can shatter a fragile happiness that takes time to build. [Tuesday 20 February]

By the following evening, he was even more desperate but almost resigned to the situation:

I have my first probation interview next week. Nerves! I hope I don't fail. Though there are some thoughts that if I do fail then I would be sent home. But I think that if I am doing anything wrong they will try and rectify the problem so that the whole process doesn't have to be repeated with another new teacher. ... I still question the worth of the education I am giving to the Aboriginal children. Too much time is spent on controlling the class to get attention before any learning takes place.

My positive attitude has gone again, or maybe it was never here. I continually question my worth. I have no self-confidence. That could be why I tried to escape from all the things in Sydney: to try to prove to myself and others that I could do something (very selfish). [Wednesday 21 February]

We caught up with Bill on Tuesday of the following week [Week 5], by which time his program had been submitted. His knee continued to bother him, made worse by the thought that the nearest doctor was five hundred kilometres away. His confidence was still at a low ebb. He felt increasingly lonely and alienated, and was even more at a loss with his surroundings. The previous weekend, to relieve the pressure he had been under, he had visited friends at the adjoining school, but had badly misjudged the distance, had run out of petrol, and had been stranded along the road for seventeen hours until rescued by a passing motorist. His recent experiences with programming were very much on his mind:

I think everyone was getting a little bit picky about it. But then we did bugger all at college about programming. In the subjects we did there, we'd sort of write a five week unit for one particular subject area, and they'd always sort of rave at an intellectual level about integrating it into a curriculum but without particular examples of it. And then [the principal] wanted a ten week program at the end of week two. I go 'What?!'

At his request, the principal had given him assistance, but not to great effect:

So she came over for five minutes and said 'oh yeah, I want this, this, this and this.' Great! And then the next week I said, 'hey listen, this is not working'. So one day she spent half an hour with me. And she said, 'you're going to have to pull your finger out and get it done'. And I've written that in my journal. That really gave me the shits. I went home and sat there and then just hit the bloody roof.

Our visit, which culminated with a dinner at the principal's house, had a therapeutic effect:

Dinner ... was great with some good laughs [which] made everyone feel relaxed. I think I am finally fitting in. I will have to learn to cook if I am to take part in more of these get togethers. My feelings tonight were mixed: I was enjoying myself but there are still strong feelings of missing everyone at home. [Tuesday 27 February]

And the week continued on a positive note, ending with the principal telling him that his program was good. 'This made me feel heaps better. So, all the worry was over nothing.' Nevertheless, there was still a strong tendency to withdraw into his shell, evident in his journal entry on Saturday night after what, for him, had been an active social whirl.

I was forced to socialise last night. ... [A]nother first year teacher came over with her husband ... and made me go over to the bar. It is nice, but it can become tiring because this week we had dinner at [the principal's], a birthday BBQ at the oval, and then this, which finished at 2 am. Somebody hid my keys so I couldn't go early. Tonight there was another BBQ I was too tired because we had been out to the river with visitors ... and so, now at 9 pm, I am writing this before I go to sleep. [Saturday 3 March]

Bill's assessment of the following week [Week 6], despite some 'good and bad days with the kids', was equally reassuring:

I had my probation meeting which, after the event, is nothing to worry about. Now, all I have to do is enjoy my life here. Well, I will try, but little things still make life hard, like getting repairs to the video [which] take so long; always having to write and wait for responses. I guess I have been conditioned to being able to have instant action when I wanted to do anything. [Saturday 10 March]

Having survived these initial tests of his professional competence, Bill's journal entries become sporadic until a week before he was due to go to Katherine for the compulsory induction recall.

Monday 26 March: Four days till I have a break where I will have a chance to get my thoughts together. But, by the time I have calmed down, it will be back into it again.

*I am becoming more accustomed to the lifestyle except for the heat. I can even tolerate the f***** red dust.*

Looking back at the term, the one thing that I could have done without is having three or four white kids in my class. I think this put pressure on me, and it should have been given to an experienced teacher.

I also still question the value of what I have taught or not taught them.

Even though I have most things that I want, I still feel like a visitor. It is not that I don't belong, but in the back of my mind it is not a place where I would settle down for the rest of my life.

When we spoke to Bill in Katherine, this reflective, questioning mood continued. He was now more aware of life in small communities, tempered by greater awareness of his own personality. He was more confident in his abilities to teach specific skills, to organise individual lessons, and to interact with colleagues, but he was no longer sure of his ability to manage classes or to cater for the wide ability range that he had encountered. He had not mastered his loneliness. Nor had he come to terms with what he was supposed to be doing as a teacher. But he was determined to stay on, pleased that he had survived his first ten weeks and his first probationary panel, although that pleasure was tinged with a strong dose of cynicism:

My personal point of view is if you go out to a school like that and you do not break the kids' arms and you have them turning up each day, and you don't go around unshaven and drunk or something during the day, and attempt to teach the kids, then you're okay.

Our project finished with the Katherine induction, but Bill was one of a small number of our participants whom we asked to continue recording his experiences for us. He agreed, and over the next few months, we were able to trace Bill's development as a teacher. Programs, probation and the daily round of classroom activities no longer presented problems but his mood swings and doubts continued. Their frequency decreased but their intensity continued until the end of the school year. The following, extract recorded in the middle of term 3, captures the essence of his despair:

*You know what I feel like at the moment? Not being here. I don't want to be here: in actual fact, I don't want to be alive. ... I'm not enjoying my life. I feel sick. I don't think anything I am doing is right. Oh, what is it? How do you feel? When you feel this bad you don't want to be on the earth. I'm extremely F***** depressed, I feel shithouse, I smoke too much, I don't eat properly, I'm getting a cold, it's giving me the shits teaching. I'm getting sick and tired of being lonely. I don't like this place up here. I want to see my friends, I want to go home. I've had it. And, to make matters worse, ... I've got extra kids in my class. Well, I've had less kids in the class, but then I had to mind a couple of classes this afternoon as well. I just really, really don't want any more. I've stopped preparing lessons. I don't think I'm cut out to teach in an Aboriginal school. Maybe I don't think I'm cut out to teach. I just can't F***** hack it at the moment. I'm getting worn out; I feel like I just can't. I was almost going to talk to [the principal] today, but I just feel scared to talk to her. She's under just as much pressure.*

*What else? I want to ring up someone. I need some support and some comforting. Comfort thyself, Billy boy! Say, 'ah, the world is lovely'. Look on the positive side of things! Motivation: f***, it's easier said than done, isn't it? Get up and smile in the morning! Go off and be a happy face - have the kids sit up and swear at you. I don't particularly need it or want it at the moment. I'm really F***** tired but I can't go to sleep until late. I come home and I'm so stuffed in the afternoons so I go to sleep at about five o'clock and wake up at about six thirty. So, that's an hour and a half there. Then what else do I do? I*

*make something to eat. Then, it's about seven thirty, so I watch the news. Then I usually watch Channel 2 for a little while, but I fall asleep in front of the TV ... Then it's about eight thirty, and I think, oh shit, I'd better do some school work, then I think, on no, I'd better do some cleaning of the house. Then, I think, oh no, I'd better put a fence up to keep the dog out. Then I think, oh no, I'd better go and pick up the wire to make the fence. Then I go, oh no. Suddenly it's ten o'clock. So I say, oh f*** it, another day's gone and I haven't done anything. Then I see people at school and they say 'what'd you do?' And I say 'oh heaps. F***** heaps!' [Monday 13 August]*

Bill is still teaching in the Northern Territory but in a different Aboriginal community school. He survived the first year, but his relationships with his colleagues and members of the community did not.

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