

## **ISOLATED SCHOOLS PROJECT**

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In January of this year ten University of Southern Queensland student teachers, each with their own preconceived idea of the West, were ready to confront the unknown experience of teaching in a rural area in North or South West Queensland. For the next three weeks we would live and breathe the role of a teacher within a rural community and have an unforgettable experience. Through the Isolated Schools Project we would be provided with many advantageous experiences including multi-level planning and timetabling; pupil free days; enrolment and administration procedures. The project would present us with an extremely beneficial teaching experience and an opportunity to discover life within a rural community. After such enjoyable experiences, we would have no hesitation in accepting a teaching position within a small rural community. You have more to gain than to lose through participating in the Isolated Schools Project therefore, we highly recommend other prospective teachers to take up the challenge.

We travelled for numerous hours on a train to reach our destinations in the South West region of Queensland. One of us, was located at an isolated, one teacher school with an enrolment of seven children, with two students in Year 3, three in Year 4 and two students in Year 7. The other a P-12 school with an enrolment of approximately of 130 students, within this school structure the primary school consisted of three multi-level grades for example, a Year 1 and 2 composite, Years 3, 4 and 5 were together and Years 6 and 7 were combined.

We discovered that the school plays a very important role within a rural community for example, it is a meeting place, unites the community, keeps the town informed through its newsletter, holds events which involve and are enjoyed by the whole town. The children attending these rural schools are not disadvantaged by their geographical location for example, they are highly resourced in terms of technology, facilities, equipment and materials, and participate in a wide range of experiences provided by the school for example, the children learn a language via Distance education through a telephone link. Distance is no obstacle to these schools in ensuring that they develop the whole child - socially, intellectually, mentally and physically for example, the children travel to learn to swim, interact with other children from other small communities at carnivals, on camps and music programs.

In such a rural setting, the role of a teacher is constant for example, people know about everything you do and say whereas, a teacher in an urban school may leave behind the "teacher" when they walk out the classroom door. In a rural community often you will live in close proximity to your students and may have close association with them and their parents outside school hours. As a teacher under these circumstances, one must always behave and act according to the community's expectations and standards for a "teacher". The most important aspect of teaching in this context requires a teacher to be highly organised in terms of planning and teaching to cater for the varying grade levels and individual abilities that exist within the classroom. It was reassuring to learn that the teachers from various small schools were working co-operatively in the development of a curriculum to suit their students' needs and the context in which they are teaching within. The timing of this Isolated Schools Experience provided us with the opportunity to explore the beginning of the school year in terms of pupil free days, timetabling, admissions registers and enrolments, developing the curriculum and planning, setting up a classroom and other teaching tasks often neglected with other practical experiences.

Teaching only a small number of students allows for a very personalised relationship to develop between student and teacher. This relationship between the students and teacher was also conveyed by the children with other members of staff for example, the teacher aide and secretary. Being a small school, the children related well with one another regardless of age or sex, and other older children provided the younger children with role models therefore, assisted with discipline within the classroom. The cohesiveness and respect that is evident between the participants in the school and the community as a whole, have created an environment conducive for learning. Open communication existed between the parents and the school which reflected the approachability and friendliness of the teacher/principal.

The community is actively involved in all aspects of the school for example, as human resources, with members of the community listening to the children read on a regular basis, and shared their skills and expertise with the children for example, poetry and woodwork. The community as a whole displayed a genuine interest in the children's learning which was demonstrated through their support and assistance. The community is continually concerned with the welfare of all its people and are eager to lend a hand when required. This is demonstrated with a member of the community taking on numerous roles to serve the community for example, a teacher may also be a member of the Fire Brigade. The community is very close-knit on both professional and social levels.

The town's people welcomed us with open arms and made us feel a part of their community. The people's generosity, friendliness and support was greatly appreciated throughout our experience. Their co-operation and understanding allowed us to gain valuable insight into teaching in an isolated community and be a member of such a community. This experience made us reconceptualise our preconceived idea of the West and reach the conclusion that we would be honoured to fulfil a position in a rural school and community. We highly recommend the Isolated Schools Project to other pre-service teachers so they too, are able to participate in a highly rewarding learning experience.