

BIRDSVILLE

Isolated Schools' Project 1999

Shelley Dwyer
Final year Primary, Bachelor of Education student
Faculty of Education
University of Southern Queensland

My first impressions of Birdsville started to form even before I arrived in the small outback town. I spent the weeks leading up to my adventure out to Birdsville watching the nightly weather reports on television ... 37°C, 38°C, 40°C. Where was I going, the desert? Oh, that's right I am!

Nervous as I was about boarding a plane that seemed to me no bigger than a large car, I was informed that my flight was delayed due to engine troubles ... definitely not a confidence booster. This plane was replaced by another, hopefully without 'engine troubles' and just my luck; it was smaller than the first! I warily boarded the eight-seater plane at the Brisbane airport, wondering whether this was going to be the end of the road for me or whether I would actually make it to the end of the western dirt road to Birdsville.

It was a hair-raising trip out as I had never been on anything smaller than an international plane before. Another passenger aboard the plane, a 75-year-old grazier, who was born and bred in Birdsville, consolidated my fears. As we approached the isolated town he showed me the floodwaters overflowing the banks of the Diamantina River. I have honestly never seen so much floodwater. It was a sight I will never forget. It looked like an enormously overblown river sitting on the edge of a desert. I couldn't help but wonder how a flood could take place when less than a kilometre away was what seemed like the driest land on earth. The water was twenty feet higher than normal, but Birdsville itself had not had a single drop of rain, just incredible! I had a wonderful time chatting with him and by the time we reached Birdsville a friendship had developed. During my stay in this country town, my grazier friend showed me the floodwaters and I was lucky enough to fly out to his station and have a look around one afternoon after school. I was really excited, as I had often read about outback properties and their homesteads, but had never had the opportunity to visit one. I jumped at the chance of flying out to his property, 'Roseberth', which is situated about 35 kilometres out of town.

It is so hard to describe the impact Birdsville has on you the first time you make contact with the sandy soil. As both an upcoming teacher and an individual my first feelings were of excitement yet isolation. I have lived on the land all my life, the last ten years of which our property experienced drought conditions, but nothing had prepared me for the desolation of Birdsville. It could very overwhelming for someone who hadn't experienced life in the country. I just loved it, the heat, the desert, the floods and the vast open spaces of 'nothingness'.

I acquired a new best friend that I knew I wouldn't stray too far from during my stay in Birdsville – the air conditioner! I find it hard to believe that people used to travel through and live in remote regions such as these, without air conditioning. I'm sure that John Burt the founder of Birdsville in 1873 would have stayed on longer if he too had met a new 'best friend', similar to mine. Nearly every house and building has air conditioning in the small town of Birdsville. The town itself runs on a generator and during my three weeks in this desert town it broke down several

times, with the longest period of time being ten hours. The only refuge in times like these was the Birdsville pub. Whoever erected this historical landmark in 1884 must have known that the breeze would always cool its occupants and a cold beer would always quench the thirst. When the generator went down, the pub became everyone's saviour.

My time in the classroom at Birdsville State School is one that I will never forget. The classroom temperature didn't take long to rise above the 50 degree Celsius mark when the air conditioners stopped pumping. However the children didn't mind the power going off during school hours because when it did, 'school time' became 'pool time'. The acting principal, the two teacher aides and I found it hard to concentrate in heat like that, so you can imagine how restless the children became. Despite the heat and humidity I found the experience in a multi-age classroom invaluable. During the three-week period I assisted the principal/teacher Mrs Deborah Curtin in setting up the classroom for the upcoming year and planning for first term. It was really beneficial to be involved in these activities as it taught me how to plan for a multi-age class, something I'd never done before. I now realise how much time and effort is required in developing a program that is shared by all grade levels and takes into consideration individual students' interests. More than ever, student needs and interests determined our planning in this outback community and children were provided with the opportunity to learn in a way that met their learning styles.

During the first week of my stay I assisted Mrs Curtin around the classroom and office and enjoyed taking small lessons. By the second week I was taking several lessons a day which I appreciated and I think she did also. The sixteen children, covering grades one through seven with both indigenous and non-indigenous backgrounds, were a delight to work with. I found the children to be well behaved although not too enthusiastic about their schoolwork. Once motivated they became very conscientious and worked well but it was getting them motivated that was the hard part. Before entering the multi-age classroom in Birdsville I thought that teaching in a one-teacher school with sixteen or less pupils would be fantastic because the teacher could have 'quality' time with each pupil. I couldn't have been more wrong! I soon realised that the teacher in a multi-age classroom has an enormous workload. There are seven different age groups in ONE classroom, with ONE teacher. How could this possibly be easier than a normal classroom setting? Each year level has to be catered for to make sure their learning is at the optimal level. I did find the teacher aides in a one-teacher school to be invaluable. Mrs Curtin prepared her weekly lessons for within the classroom, plus a maths program and a reading program to be implemented by the two teacher aides out of the classroom. This enabled each year level to work together, although separate from the rest of the class for part of the school day. Responsible, reliable teacher aides acted as facilitators in guiding the students' learning. Although the teacher was in control of the running of the school, the teacher aides were relied upon to help the teacher nurture, teach, and guide the children through various learning activities.

A positive attribute of teaching in an isolated school is flexibility. As I've said the program is adapted to suit the needs of the children, the school and the community. This is definitely an advantage for the children. Another factor that helps the school to function optimally is the fact that the school is the center of the community. The community of Birdsville revolves around the school so Mrs Curtin has a number of roles in the rural community. Her life almost becomes *public* life and she has to take care to maintain a balance between professional and personal activities.

Like any profession, teaching has both positive and negative sides, but it's what you make of it that really matters. I think the principle at Birdsville State School works miracles in her classroom. It is obvious that the teachers/principals in isolated schools throughout Queensland

need to cope not only with the environment but also with classrooms full of students of varying ages, backgrounds, learning styles and abilities. A thick skin, lots of patience and especially a great sense of humour are definitely attributes which would stand by a teacher in a one-teacher school.

I think that every pre-service teacher should experience at least rural, if not isolated schools practicum before entering the big, wide world of teaching. The experience gained in Birdsville has been invaluable and I look forward to using my newfound knowledge and awakened enthusiasm for multi-age classroom management throughout my future years in the teaching profession.

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Ian McKay

Ian McKay

Conference Convenor



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- Flexible Delivery: initiative and innovation
- Rural Communities and their Schools
- Making it Work: vocational education and training opportunities in rural areas
- Indigenous Education: creating new opportunities in a rural context

Who Should Attend?

- Distance education administrators and teachers
- Administrators and teachers from rural schools
- System administrators
- University academics
- Parents – particularly distance education home tutors
- Anyone interested in the future of education in rural Australia