

TEACHING IN GUNPOWDER

Isolated Schools' Project 1999

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Sixteen eager, curious, faces from six to twelve years looked back at me on this, my first day of school in Gunpowder. To set the scene: it was a small, rural community near Mount Isa in central Queensland. The classroom was big. It fitted all of the students' desks in a U shape, the teacher's desk, three work stations and had floor space to spare. Last year's work hung from the walls and ceiling. I was working with the principal and sole teacher Mrs Jacques. I was nervous, excited and eager to start this new year.

Having participated in the Isolated Children's Project at the beginning of 1998, when the opportunity arose to participate in the Isolated Schools Project (ISP) again, I leapt at the chance to apply for a second time. As a soon-to-be graduate, I wanted to gain as much experience in as many various teaching avenues as I could. This was the perfect opportunity.

I chose ISP because I wanted to know what teaching and planning for a one-teacher school involved. Though the likelihood of my first teaching position being a one-teacher school is not great, the chance of having to teach composite grades is, and that unnerved me. After my time away in Gunpowder I am even more committed to becoming a teacher. So after taking part in the ISP, I want to share my story in the hope of encouraging others to take on this invaluable learning experience.

Gunpowder State School is a band four one-teacher school that has sixteen children enrolled this year (1999). The school has all the resources that you expect to find in a metropolitan school, such as a library, photocopier, science and art materials and a huge resource collection for unit and lesson ideas. There is one teacher, Principal Mr Jacques who teaches the students for four days every week – she has one day off.



A view depicting the houses and the hills that surround Gunpowder

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The upper grades (5-7) participate in LOTE via distance education and have a Japanese teacher who comes out every second Friday. A music teacher comes in every Friday and takes over for the principal for the day. Once a term, a Guidance Counsellor visits (although the counsellor can come when required), along with a physical education teacher/adviser, special education teacher and net testers.

Throughout the year, the children have access to inter-school sporting activities with Mt Isa schools, such as swimming and athletics carnivals. Within Gunpowder itself, the children can use a swimming pool and two tennis courts. Currently Gunpowder State School is receiving funding for computers for the children to use. The computers are seen as an important part of the children's education as they have many worthwhile programs to enhance the children's knowledge of technology and allow them to participate in their world.

Parents take an active interest in their child's education. Those who can, help out with swimming lessons, reading and other activities that may arise. Without the parents' support at this school, swimming and other sporting events could not go ahead simply due to the teacher/child ration required at such functions.

I found planning and teaching the whole 1-7 grades a welcome challenge. No sooner would you give the Year Ones something to do and begin to explain the activity to the rest of the class and one of them would put their hand up and ask what to do next. I found it challenging to find activities that did not require complete one-on-one assistance. It was great to have the older children take some responsibility for their work and help others. Mrs Jacques and I worked out a system of team-teaching -- so she could take a group while I had a group. This gave the children more teacher contact, which was handy when they were having difficulty in an area of content.

Another challenge with such a wide range of ages in the classroom was maintaining attention and interest in activities for science. The older children would be bored with questions to which they knew the answers but these were areas the younger ones were just learning. At appropriate times, that problem was overcome by asking the older children to explore concepts further for themselves, or by allowing them to help the younger children.

Some of the children had to learn to cooperate and be patient with one another, since there was sixteen children in the one room. The difficulties may have been due to the age differences, tolerance levels and generally completing solo activities. I found there was sometimes tension between the older children and that filtered down to some of the younger children. The clash of personalities in such a small school required the implementation of a friendship program between older and younger to help erase any of the barriers. Of course, there are always tensions and difficulties in any classroom, though in this situation I was dealing with different aged children instead of one age level.

One of the most valuable parts of my time away were the friendships made with parents and children. They are so rewarding. Parents often stop you for a chat and the children tell you about their weekend. The most special part of my time was, strangely, when I was leaving. The children planned a surprise party for me with a poem, cake and a card. Another thing that touched me was one child who cried, stamped his feet and yelled when he found I was leaving. It was really wonderful to know that they did respect and like me because some days I felt like the proverbial 'Dragon Lady'. Being in such a small community and having all the children respect you is such a bonus, since there is no other teacher they can go to.



The class and Mrs Jacques participating in a lunchtime game of Hockey

All schools and teaching positions encounter challenges that can create negative barriers. In an isolated setting however these are often more difficult to deal with, simply due to one factor – everyone knows everyone. Being such a small community, difficulties that arise are soon known by everyone and require patience. You are limited in what you can do right then, because you are very likely to offend someone and teaching could become an uphill battle as everyone could be offside. If no one respect you or your teaching methods, you could soon find yourself left out and not welcome. The only real choice in such a small community to accept things how they are, gain their trust and gradually change tradition.

This was my first experience in a one teacher setting where I had to partly plan for and teach the whole seven grades. Mrs Jacques, the teaching principal, throughout my two and a half weeks there, answered my questions, discussed my opinions and supported my attempts at teaching and dealing with this new challenging experience.

Through dealing with the children over the two and a half weeks, I grew to know each child's strengths. I also began to see which behaviour techniques worked and which did not with each individual child. This taught me to know how to teach and approach each child. I found that I enjoyed working with each child, their abilities and ideas and dealing with them on a partnership level. Though that was not possible all of the time, when it was, it was great. I loved the challenge of working with a child who may have been experiencing some difficulty and positively dealing with it, without getting them or myself upset. Most of all my time at Gunpowder showed me why I enjoy teaching. I love the challenge of it.

From a future teacher who is still practising teaching ideas and techniques, having a chance to try some of them out in a real and challenging classroom situation and realise my teaching ability and style was invaluable. I had the opportunity and the teacher who allowed me to explore areas of myself and my teaching style that had never been encountered before. I went into a 'prac' knowing what was expected and where the unit was going and what outcomes were expected as I had the opportunity to help develop a unit plan in full.

This was the most personally rewarding and knowledge building experience I have had the opportunity to complete. Many thanks needs to go to the schools (especially Gunpowder State

School) that give future teachers like myself the opportunity to learn so much. In addition, many thanks to the Department of Education Queensland, the ACPA and PCAP who without their full financial assistance for travel students like myself could not afford to go. Finally, to The University of Southern Queensland and Sheila King whose patience in coordinating all placements and travel arrangements was phenomenal. I hope that more students and schools each year will see the positive benefits that this programme offers to all those involved and take part.