

## Internship in a small school – what an experience!

Bonnie Hieatt, Student B Ed (EC), Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW

*If you make a left hand turn off the Olympic Highway about 25 kilometres out of the township of Young you will find it there. Amongst the towering gum trees, green paddocks and a couple of sheep, there is a small wooden building bordered by neatly kept gardens, a tennis court, a toilet block, an even smaller brick library and a large green oval which almost whispers to you, to come and play on it. This description is the setting for a most amazing and extraordinarily welcoming learning environment. It provides a community of families with a unique educational experience, through a strong commitment to student welfare. Here, the people are as fresh and sweet as the air they breathe. Sound inviting? Welcome to Bendick Murrell Public School.*

I wouldn't consider myself a city girl; my mother comes from a property about 30 kilometres west of Trundle, central New South Wales, and although I have spent every other Christmas there, I wouldn't consider myself a country girl either. I went to school in Canberra, which I guess is somewhere in between. Before visiting Bendick Murrell for my Fourth Year Professional Internship, I wasn't familiar with the small school structure. This seems silly to me now, given that my aunt teaches at Trundle Central and my great grandmother was the first female to teach in a school west of Orange. It would appear that small schools and my family have some sort of history together.

My Bachelor of Education program allows students in their fourth year to work as interns in a school or early childhood setting, operating as a full member of the staff team and experiencing as nearly as possible the full demands and rewards of a graduate teacher. I chose Bendick Murrell for my Internship based on three main factors. The first was the Principal. He had been a teacher at my primary school, arriving the year I was leaving and although he never actually taught me in the classroom, I remembered him to be popular amongst his students within the school, just as he is today. Not only is he well liked by his students he is also a highly respected teacher within the community. The second factor was my desire to gain experience in the Primary years of teaching. The final factor which contributed to my choice of school was the fact that I wanted experience with all the Primary Grades, not just one. This small school, allowed me to gain the experience that I wished for - as all the children were in the same room!

The purpose of this article is for me to reflect on my intern experience and in doing so I wish to discuss the benefits that attending a small school can offer a child, a family and a community. I will use my experiences and reflections of Bendick Murrell Public School as a means to illustrate these benefits and demonstrate just how unique an experience attending a small school can be.

Bendick Murrell Public has two teachers, one being a teaching principal, and one classroom teacher. As well as the full time staff there is a teacher librarian and a release teacher. The support staff included one part-time teacher, one part-time support teacher of learning disabilities, an integration aide and a student welfare teacher. Inside the 'small wooden building' that I described earlier are four rooms; two are the

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children's classrooms, one computer room and one principals' office/administration office/meeting room/storage room/staff room. When all staff are present, the wooden schoolhouse is an environment that is not only cosy but also rich in teaching knowledge and expertise.

The school has a strong focus on basic skills and instructional programs meeting the needs of all students. Special education programs have been arranged for students with identified disabilities. A well-established interactive program with other schools operated within the district. This provides a supportive network for professional and student contacts, which enhances the opportunities for growth and exchange of ideas and resources.

The school has developed and implemented its own initiatives to cater for the needs of all students. These initiatives include: literacy targeting; an extensive creative arts (musical) program; an Indonesian language program; extended sporting opportunities; public speaking and debating program; ISDN line computing facilities; a strong student welfare program; unique excursion opportunities; a 'hands-on' environmental program including recycling, a compost heap and the school's own organic vegetable garden; participation in the Country Area Program (CAP) learning projects and participation in the School Transition and Resilience Training (START) program. I witnessed all these initiatives being put into practice whilst an intern at Bendick Murrell and believe that these are some of the highlights of the 'small school experience'.

The school literacy team meets fortnightly to review the progress of the school literacy targets. A review of the English syllabus has impacted on current teaching and learning programs by providing a greater understanding by students, parents and teachers through students' work samples unifying teaching and learning through a whole school approach. The school has a Reading Recovery Teacher on staff who acts as a mentor for other staff members. The learning community is involved in the school's literacy development through home reading, in-school reading tutors and the support of students, individual programs at home.

The creative arts (music) program at the school amazed and enlightened me. The aspect that impressed me the most was the Young Schools Marimba Program, which has been a focus of the program for the last two years. A marimba is a xylophone with a deeper range of notes and is made of wood. The program, which was devised and initiated by the Principal, involved the children actually making the instrument, by this I mean carving the notes and then tuning them with the use of a guitar tuner. The instrument is then decoratively painted by the students. Each marimba is for two or three players, which fosters a more social and interactive attitude towards music. These instruments were the feature of the Young and District Small Schools Choral and Instrumental Concert that took place when I was an intern. Observing ten small schools working collaboratively in rehearsals of singing and playing recorders and marimbas was truly amazing. A fitting tribute to this marimba program at Bendick Murrell was their selection in the 1998 & 2000 Schools Instrumental Festival at the Sydney Opera House. When told of the opportunity to be a part of this festival, the children's expressions of excitement were unforgettable. To be given the chance to perform at this venue as a school child was clearly priceless.

There is always some form of music playing within the school, be it 'working music' inside the classroom coming from the CD player, or the keyboard playing. The school employs a tutor from the Young Regional School of Music for keyboard tuition.

Every Friday morning the Primary students participate in the Indonesian language program via a *Voicepoint* in their classroom. This program includes Indonesian beliefs, customs, religion and people, with emphasis on food, music, art/craft and language. The Indonesian teacher is actually located at Caragabal School and teaches the same lesson to a number of schools in the district. This program is an excellent example of how outside resources are well utilised at the school, allowing the children to develop their understanding of multiculturalism.

The sporting program at Bendick Murrell provides all students with the opportunity to participate in regular sporting carnivals. With a tennis court on the grounds, the school is able to employ a tennis coach to provide expertise in skill development. This coaching also applies to swimming as the school uses the Bendick Murrell pool, located seconds up the road. Here the children can benefit from one to one coaching as part of the in-school service. Whilst I was on internship the Primary students participated in a Hockey Gala Day and while I didn't know the rules of the game, I encouraged the children's efforts and enthusiasm (the latter rarely needing much of this).

The school participates in a Debating and Public Speaking competition involving other local schools. This provides the Primary students with opportunities to develop their language, listening, comprehension and problem solving skills. It fosters self-confidence and the ability to write and speak to a particular audience.

The school is equipped with six computers, all of which are ISDN connected, which provides the students with the fastest access to the Internet. The use of the Internet has expanded the students' research and information capabilities. The skill level of the students has also increased through the developmental nature of technology use.

Bendick Murrell Public School has programs that cater for students of various ability levels and individual needs. Trained support staff cater for students with learning difficulties, musical aptitude and interests through extension programs and outdoor leaning programs. Close liaison with Community Health allows the school to support all students in protective behaviours, personal development and health related issues.

One of the unique excursion opportunities that was to take place after I left my internship was a trip to Sydney to see the Paralympics, as a school. Teachers, parents and children were to travel to Sydney and stay in a YMCA Hostel for 3 days and 2 nights and visit Stadium Australia for a once in a lifetime performance of athletic ability. The school has a penpal relationship with one of the Paralympians, Angela Ballard. They contact her via the email and are excited when she corresponds.

Another initiative that has been devised and implemented by the Principal is the Organic Vegetable Garden. This is situated on the other side of the 'large green oval' I described earlier and is maintained by the students, for the students. They have built their own compost heap, which they use to condition the soil. This experience of

owning a garden can be linked to other Key Learning Areas. All students are responsible for the upkeep of the garden and take this responsibility willingly.

The strong commitment to Student Welfare at Bendick Murrell is demonstrated by the school's involvement in outside programs. An example is the C.A.P District project, which the Principal of the school coordinates for his area. The general aim is to develop projects that have a "Focus on Learning", with anticipated outcomes such as to engage students in a variety of learning experiences to develop their thinking skills. This outcome is achieved frequently at the school within the classroom learning and extra curricula activities. A variety of teaching strategies are used which are designed to stimulate students' thinking on a number of current issues.

Another program that the school is involved in is the S.T.A.R.T program (School Transition and Resilience Training). This involves supporting the students and families in the transition from Year 6 (Primary School) to Year 7 (High School) and is one of the Victorian Government's 'Strategy Against Drug Abuse' programs.

These initiatives that the staff at Bendick Murrell have implemented are an overview of what the school has to offer. These alone are benefits of being involved in a small school learning experience. However, it was more than just the curriculum that inspired me to write about my experiences at this school. It was the level of parent and community interaction and support. The caring and trusting relationships that existed between the teachers and their students, parents and colleagues and of course the interactions between the students themselves. From the moment that I arrived I was warmly welcomed by the school community and quickly felt a sense of belonging. The interactions between people were genuine and caring and I feel this overflowed into the classrooms, generating a positive learning environment. I was pleasantly surprised by the small number of children in the classroom, and their ability to work as independent learners. Instantly I saw the benefits of having a lower teacher:child ratio, as the one to one interaction proved a valuable aspect of the learning environment.

The learning that took place inside the classroom impressed me as much as the learning that took place outside the classroom. The children's enthusiasm and behaviour towards activities both in and outside of the classroom illustrated their commitment to learning and respect for their teacher.

One Friday was a dedicated 'Tree Planting Day'. With assistance from Greening Australia, the whole school community planted over five hundred trees at the Bendick Murrell Community Reserve. Not only did this experience teach the children values about the preserving and maintaining our environment, it also taught them skills in sharing, cooperating, working as a team and the obvious - how to plant a tree! After the planting was over we had a barbecue lunch and a few laughs, which was great. That day, I witnessed a sense of school and community spirit that I would wish to see again, throughout my career.

Cotton, (1996, p 3, 5) conducted a study into school size, climate and student performance. Amongst the findings of the study are the following.

One key feature of small schools and units is that everyone's participation is needed for clubs, teams and student government to have an adequate number of members. Closely related to the participation factor is the observation that people in small schools and units come to know and care about one another to a much greater degree than is possible in large school. This applies to relationships among students, among staff members, between staff and students and between the school and its surrounding community.

The higher rates of parents' involvement in smaller schools or units is frequently cited as a major positive influence on student achievement and attitudes. Parents are more likely to know the principal and teachers, be informed about their children's progress, participate more fully in school activities and influence decision making.

Staff and students generally have a stronger sense of personal efficacy in small schools and units. Students take more of the responsibility for their own learning, learning activities are more frequently individualised and classes are smaller.

Levels of extracurricular participation are much higher and more varied in small schools than large ones, and students in small school derive greater satisfaction from their extracurricular participation.

These findings match my reflections of school life at Bendick Murrell, where the genuine enthusiasm and sense of community is refreshing. I observed: close, meaningful relationships between teachers and children, parents and colleagues; a high rate of parental involvement; students taking responsibility for independent learning; and a high level of extracurricular opportunities and participation.

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#### REFERENCE

Cotton, K. (1996). SCHOOL SIZE, SCHOOL CLIMATE, AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE. School Improvement Research Series. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory