

LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK – REFLECTIONS FROM SPERA LIFE MEMBERS

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SPERA Life Members

SETTING THE SCENE

Australian education has had a long tradition of providing education to children in its rural and remote places. Starting with one teacher schools that were temporary, or provisional or half time in both their operation and nature through to itinerant traveling teachers originally in covered wagons and then motor vehicles leading to the permanent establishment of primary schools in rural locations, every state and territory education authority and rural community have recognised the value and importance of providing education for its children where they live.

Yet, in spite of the strong demand for rural schools and staffing operations in each Australian state and territory education system, rural education was the often neglected or treated like ‘the ugly duckling’ to quote Johnathon Sher’s words. While teacher unions and teacher professional / curriculum organisations emerged and flourished, there was no equivalent voice for rural education, rural teachers, rural communities and their specific place related concerns.

SPERA INFANCY

Inspired by her experience observing rural community attitudes to education from the east coast, to the mid west and on the Indian reservations in the south of the United States, Marie returned home in 1982 and began planning for a National Conference on Rural Education in Australia. In 1984 with the support of Bob Meyenn, CSU Bathurst, Derrick Tomlinson Director, National Centre for Rural Education in Australia, Ian Barnard NSW Education Commission and Daphne Clarke, Director NSW In-service Education, Marie launched SPERA in Armidale, NSW at a state in-service conference.

Ian Barnard came up with the name Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia, SPERA because of its Latin origin “hope.” Bob and Marie and Derrick took up positions on the executive. Bob and Marie began lobbying state and federal governments with the aim of changing the perception of disadvantage in rural Australia. It was their view that the strengths of rural education should be built upon and recognised for its positive attributes. In our meetings with politicians and policymakers it surprised them to learn that we were not a lobby group with a funding agenda, but a lobby group that was interested in changing perceptions of and attitudes towards rural communities. We knew that we had to do the work to uproot and promote the best examples of rural education in order to change this perception.

We wanted our subsequent conferences to bring forward rural educators who were pioneering new ways of delivering education to children and adults in rural areas. We wanted to hear from teachers who had developed curriculum with a rural flavor. An example of this was the science teacher who encouraged his students to bring in the skins of rabbits they had shot, and with advice from the local tannery, the teacher developed a unit of study on the science of tanning. The skins were then pegged out in the sun. There was great enthusiasm for his class.

We wanted our audience to see that rural people are not inherently disadvantaged in themselves but that we are disadvantaged in the way we are treated. We wanted people to see that claiming disadvantage is a mindset that locks us into looking at what we do not have, (in relation to urban education) rather than building upon our own resources.

SPERA MIDDLE YEARS

As SPERA moved into its tenth year it was time to review and grow the membership base. At this time there was a very strong commitment from the university and adult learning sector. SPERA began making a concerted effort to broaden its membership base into the schooling sector and also worked on attracting community members interested in education in rural and remote settings.

Our conference held in Cairns in 1993 took the theme of 'Schooling at a Distance'. This attracted many teachers and strengthened SPERA's membership base enormously. From that conference another organisation was initiated, AADES, to support professionals working in schools of distance education across Australia.

The Cairns conference was followed by our first visit to Western Australia - a great place to celebrate our tenth birthday and demonstrate our commitment to rural education right across Australia. At this conference we acknowledged the tremendous contribution of Marie Dale and awarded her Life membership. This was also the conference where the Australian Rural Education Award was introduced.

The Australian Rural Education Award was initiated as a way to acknowledge many of the wonderful practical activities occurring in education in rural or remote Australia. The Australian Rural Education Award (AREA) acknowledges excellence in rural education, endorses a positive image of education provision in rural and remote communities, and demonstrates successful strategies for meeting the educational needs of rural people. Each year, AREA applicants are reviewed against the following criteria:

- a practical project occurring in the community;
- the unique attributes in a rural context; and
- the value of the project in expanding opportunities for rural communities.

Each year, the AREA award recipient is invited to the SPERA annual conference where the announcement of the award and a presentation by the recipient is made for that year as well as presenting merit awards. Details of the annual recipient are published on the SPERA website as acknowledgement of the achievements.

In the fifteen years that AREA has been awarded there have been many wonderful projects shared with conference participants as well as the wider

education community. This has been a practical demonstration to the education profession of the strength and value of each project. It has also established SPERA as a professional association to support educators and community members with an interest in rural education.

In 2001 Sheila King was awarded life membership for her contribution to the delivery of excellence in education for the bush. As president of the organization for 10 years Sheila demonstrated outstanding leadership in integrating the school sector as a strong membership component for SPERA. Sheila also played a lead role in the establishment of the Australian Rural Education Award.

SPERA ADOLESCENCE

SPERA has evolved and grown in stature and reputation as a national professional organisation since its inception. One of SPERA's fundamental aims has been to celebrate and disseminate information on and about exemplary educational practice in rural and remote locations. This focus on quality educational provision in rural and remote places has been identified by both Federal and state governments who have invited SPERA and its membership to make submissions and representations on a variety of aspects of rural education provision.

One of the most significant contributions that SPERA has made to Australian rural education has been organisation and conduct of its annual National Conference. The annual Conference is the event that showcases rural education policy, practice and provision with a truly national perspective. One of SPERA's policy decisions that has significantly contributed to the importance of the annual conference was its determination to rotate the venue for its annual conference across each state and territory. This decision has seen conferences being conducted in places such as Cairns, Launceston, Wagga Wagga, Kalgoorlie, Alice Springs, Bendigo, Albury, Townsville and Ballarat. As the venue changes so does the conference theme and the participation in the annual conference by government and non-government educators from within each state or territory. Collectively, this diversity has been a great strength of the SPERA national Conference and has assisted in the recognition of the conference as *the* significant event for rural educators nationally. Also, the publication of the Conference Proceedings provides a valuable resource and collection of programs and practices. The Conference Proceedings have become a significant and readily accessible resource for teachers in rural schools, for educational administrators at the regional, state or federal levels, for community groups wishing to explore new and innovative ways of accessing education, for pre-service teachers to understand the diversity of issues and challenges facing educators in rural and remote places, and for researchers who seek to develop insights into rural education. The rise in the importance of the annual National Conference is also reflected in the steady growth of international rural educators who attend, present papers, or deliver keynote addresses at the annual conference. SPERA Conferences have had presentation from people from many countries including New Zealand, Scotland, England, Canada, and the United States of America. The rise of the significance of the annual National Conference continues in this 25th year of SPERA where a partnership between AARNeT and SPERA will

see the delivery of one keynote address by Professor Ken Stevens from Memorial University in Newfoundland Canada via interactive videoconferencing.

The contribution to knowledge and research on and about rural education has been a major commitment for SPERA over the past 19 years. In 1991 SPERA launched its journal, **Education in Rural Australia**, as a means of promoting rural education nationally. Since that time, the journal has grown in reputation and status. It has attracted a readership that is both national and international. The journal now receives manuscripts from practitioners, researchers and community members from all Australian states and territories as well as manuscripts from overseas authors.

The reputation and standing of the Education in Rural Australia journal has been assessed by the 2007 Federal Government's independent journal review process which saw Education in Rural Australia ranked in the top 10 of 45 like focused journal world wide. Education in Rural Australia is abstracted into a number of national and international journal service organisations including: the Australian Education Index, ERIC Clearinghouse, EBSCOHOST and Informit databases. All of these databases recognise the contributions that Education in Rural Australia journal makes to dissemination of information on rural education.

In 2007 Colin Boylan was awarded Life membership for over 20 years contribution to SPERA. Colin has been instrumental in the development of the journal and the annual conference proceedings ensuring a valuable resource is available to the education community.

Since 1983, SPERA has come of age as a professional organisation. It has responded to the changing times, priorities and conditions of rural education provision by being a well organised, professional and articulate voice for rural education. There have been significant challenges for SPERA as changing Federal and state policies on education have seen new policy directions and initiatives arise over the past 25 years. One such policy change has been the introduction of Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs into schools Australia wide. SPERA recognised the significance of providing VET courses locally in rural high schools and has supported initiatives in this area through inclusion of articles about VET in Schools in the Education in Rural Australia journal; and through recognition of outstanding VET practices by awards and commendations in the Australian Rural Education Award program.

COMING OF AGE – THE PATH FORWARD

It was a SPERA member, Dr Phillip Thomas, who pointed out the synergy between what SPERA's aims, goals and aspirations for rural education are and the Latin word 'spera' which translates as 'hope'. Indeed SPERA as an organisation has not only brought hope to rural and remote educational providers and communities in Australia but also continues to voice hope as a dynamic champion that presents the exciting, innovative, creative and exemplary practices, programs and policies that happen across Australia.

As SPERA comes of age this is not a time to rest on our laurels. As with all professional associations there are challenges ahead which SPERA needs to tackle if it is to remain an effective force in the education community. SPERA needs to

continue to evolve within the global education sphere whilst retaining its strong rural Australian links. The recent conference themes have provided a wealth of ideas and ways forward for SPERA to embrace the use of technology to ensure the association remains at the cutting edge. The challenge now is to ensure that this occurs.

Over many years SPERA has prided itself in supporting novice and pre-service teachers who take up positions in rural and remote Australia. This has occurred in a number of ways and recently has been a specific focus for the executive. In 2009 SPERA initiated an exciting new program where it invited membership from the pre-service educator body across Australia and that membership is growing. The challenge for SPERA is now to take this to the next step and establish a network of support that will be a valuable tool for pre-service educators and novice teachers who take up positions in rural or remote settings. This is a vital step to ensure that the next decade of educators is supported and recognised as a professional association collaborating to provide quality and excellence across Australia.

Perhaps SPERA might consider linking in with the Federal Governments “big idea” from the citizens forum where retired volunteers make themselves available to work in rural and remote communities. SPERA might lobby for a component of this initiative to include rural educators and rural development people. It would be up to the community to identify what kind of volunteer they want and for how long.

A second initiative might be for SPERA to partner with rural industry to provide a scholarship to a rural student who is attending a rural school to support financially the fees and textbook costs for study at university or TAFE. SPERA’s role could be that it promotes the scholarship and provides a mentoring role to the recipient.

THANK YOU

As Life Members of SPERA, we thank SPERA for their recognition of our contributions and truly appreciate this highest level of accolade and public acknowledgement and are deeply committed to our ongoing support for SPERA and its future directions. We are confident that SPERA is in good hands and has a strong, vibrant and dynamic executive whose leadership will ensure that SPERA flourishes over the next 25 years.