

# **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: IMPACT ON TEACHERS IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS**

**Barry A . Fields**  
**Senior Lecturer in Special Education**  
**Faculty of Education**  
**University of Southern Queensland**

For some years now most state and territory departments of education have embraced policies favouring the integration of children with special needs into regular classrooms (Ashman & Elkins, 1990). Many states have recently redefined their policies. This is particularly the case for Queensland and New South Wales where quite elaborate policy documents and management plans have been prepared and disseminated. The most recent policies reaffirm central office support for integration, but now within the context of inclusive education, social justice, and the imperatives of anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation (Department of Education, Queensland, 1993). What hasn't changed over this period are the concerns expressed by teachers about the difficulties of implementing such policies and the demands placed on teachers in respect of workload and professional expertise (Graham, 1991; McCollow, 1992).

While teachers in most primary and secondary schools are faced with the challenge presented by the presence of students with learning and/or school adjustment difficulties in their classrooms, the burden on teachers in small rural schools can be, and often is significantly greater. Small schools, especially one, two and three teacher schools, have difficulty attracting specialist support personnel and other support services. Further, their capacity to generate within school solutions to the problems created by inclusive education is limited compared to schools with large staffs and more facilities.

Despite the fact that 81,600 of Queensland's primary school children attend rural schools (Department of Education, Queensland, 1992), very little is known about how many children with special needs are in these settings, and what type of learning and adjustment problems they are experiencing. Indeed, there is very little research of any kind on special education children in rural schools. It is little consolation to Australian students and teachers that a similar dearth of research exists in other western countries as well (Helge, 1984).

The study reported here aimed to develop a picture of the number and type of children with special needs in small rural schools in Queensland. The intent was not to achieve a complete nor necessarily representative assessment of learning and school adjustment problems found in rural schools. Rather, the study sought, through a sample of rural classrooms, to explore the nature of the problems rural teachers encounter and the impact of the policy of inclusive education on teachers and children in these settings.

## **The Study**

A total of 50 Year 1-7 primary school teachers participated in the study. The 50 schools at which these teachers taught were all situated outside of the Brisbane area and the state's major provincial cities. In the main, they were located in the South Western, Northern, North Western, Peninsula and Capricornia school regions of the state, and were small to medium in size (7 - 250 students).

Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) licensed copy. Further copying and  
Communication prohibited except on payment of fee per Copy or Communication  
And otherwise in accordance with the licence from CAL to ACER. For more  
Information contact CAL on (02) 9394-7600 or [info@copyright.com.au](mailto:info@copyright.com.au)

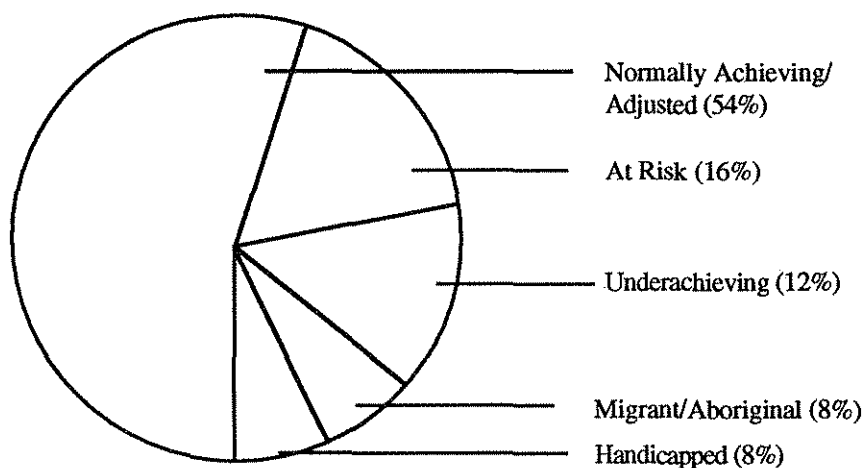
The teachers were asked to provide brief biographical descriptions of all the children in their class who were experiencing learning difficulties (were below grade level in achievement in English Language and/or Mathematics), or who evidenced behavioural and related school adjustment problems. In addition, the teachers were asked to provide biographies of children who were "at risk" of school failure and adjustment problems because of potentially deleterious circumstances in their family, community, or broader social environment.

### Study Findings

Averaging across the 50 classrooms from which data were obtained, the 'typical' small rural school class would be as depicted in Figure 1. Out of a class of 24 pupils, 13 (54%) would be considered by their teacher to be normally adjusted, normally achieving children. The remaining children would present special needs of varying kinds. Two children would be classifiable as handicapped, three would be underachieving, two would be from migrant or culturally different (aboriginal) groups, and four would be "at risk" of academic or school adjustment problems.

**Figure 1**  
**Average Class Profile for a Sample of Small Queensland Rural Schools**

(N = 24)



## **Handicapped**

The type of handicapped children one would expect to find in many regular school classrooms across the state were also evident in this sample of rural classrooms. Teachers reported having children with intellectual disabilities, physical and health impairments, sensory handicaps, specific learning disabilities, speech and communication disorders, and behaviour disorders. Two children out of 24 (8%) is in fact close to commonly accepted prevalence estimates for handicapped children in the regular school population.

## **Underachieving Children**

In most classrooms you would expect to find some children who were underachieving, i.e., at a level below what would normally be expected of them. In this study about 12% of the children were in this category. The information provided by the class teachers indicated that underachievement was related to lack of interest in school, low levels of motivation, lack of interest from parents in their children's education, and negative family and community view of schooling and future employment prospects or occupational success.

## **Children from Ethnic and Culturally Different Backgrounds**

It is interesting that the diversity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds one has come to associate with city and urban communities is also evident in rural settings. In the classrooms surveyed during this investigation, children from families who had migrated from South Africa, India Malaysia, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Phillipines, Fiji, Italy, Lebanon, Argentina, to name but a few, were represented. Unlike city schools where the proportion of migrant children is large and diverse, rural classrooms might have one or two migrant children and more often from the one nationality.

Aboriginal children were represented in the majority of the 50 classrooms surveyed. The numbers were always small, although it is understood that in some rural schools the proportion of aboriginal children is quite high.

While migrant and aboriginal children do not necessarily have problems in school, invariably they do. An ESL program is needed where English is not spoken at home and where proficiency in English is poor. Aboriginal children need particular understanding where nutritional and health problems exist, and where there is evidence of alcohol or physical abuse in the home. Many aboriginal children were reported to have had achievement levels well below grade level.

## **At Risk Children**

The term "at risk" is an ill-defined although commonly used description. It is used to define a very heterogeneous group of children who because of a variety of family or community circumstances may develop school learning and/or adjustment problems (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). Into this category would fall children whose parents were going through divorce or separation; children living in single parent families; children who are the victims of physical or sexual abuse; children exposed to an environment where there is alcohol abuse and/or the use of illegal drugs; children of transient families and children from families where changed economic conditions adversely affect family relations and standard of living. All of the above factors can lead to school problems. Interestingly, this was the largest group of special needs children identified by the teachers in the study, encompassing about 16% of the children in the average rural classroom.

## **Recurring Difficulties**

The biographies of the children with special needs prepared by the teachers in the study highlight several common factors in the background of the children identified. Many of the children were from families where there was little interest in and support for the education process. All too often the children had not had a preschool education. Many children were from single parent families. Frequent parent condoned school absenteeism was not uncommon with seasonal work commitments and shiftwork (in mining towns for example). Long term unemployment in the families of children with special needs was evident in many of the biographies. In children described as "at risk" a significant number involved single parent families. Separation and divorce can have devastating affects on children, and can result in considerable emotional distress and a deterioration in school performance.

## **Limited Support Services**

Historically, children with special needs have been narrowly defined as children from one of the traditionally recognized categories of handicap. Often quite comprehensive special education support services are available to assist these children whether they be in special schools, special units, or in regular schools. Remedial education and related support services have been developed for children with significant academic problems, and more recently ESL services have expanded to accommodate increasing number of non-English speaking children. Aboriginal children in more remote areas of the state and in areas where there is a concentration of aboriginal families have had some recognition of their need for tailored support services.

The allocation of support services across the state, however, favours larger population centres in the main. The capacity of the Department of Education to effectively provide for the needs of children in small rural schools is severely limited given the staff and funds available. In many cases these schools receive a token service with such support as a half yearly visit from a special education consultant or advisory teacher, and a once weekly Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) service.

## **Summary and Discussion**

The above difficulties could not be said to be unique to small rural schools. All classrooms will have children with special needs, and more and more there is an understanding that such children represent a very diverse group of individuals. The philosophy and practice of inclusive education means that all such children are seen as part of the school community and that the curriculum should respond to their needs. This is a commendable perspective and one which the teachers in this study appear to be aware and accepting of. The teacher in the small rural school however, is expected to facilitate inclusive education without access to the level of support colleagues in larger schools and population centres experience. The state's advisory, consultative, and direct support services are often unavailable to small, remote schools, or so infrequent as not to have any meaningful impact. And yet, these services are recognized as essential to the provision of appropriate education to children with special needs. Further, teachers in small rural schools have limited access to both formal and informal in-service education and related professional development opportunities. The geographic isolation of their schools is matched by a professional isolation which must place a considerable strain on teachers, many of whom are young and inexperienced. This makes the provision of quality education for children with special needs particularly difficult. It is hoped that as the impact of inclusive education is evaluated over the next year or so the particular problems of rural schools, and the needs of teachers in those settings will be recognized and responded to.

## REFERENCES

Department of Education, Queensland. (1992) CENSUS. Management Information Services Branch.

Department of Education, Queensland. (1993) *Educational Provision For Students With Disabilities: Policy Statement And Management Plan*. student disability unit, studies directorate.

Graham, L. (1991) Integration Increases Workloads. *Queensland Teachers' Journal*, 14 (2), 5.

Helge, D. (1984) The State of the Art of Rural Special Education, *Exceptional Children*, 50 (4), 294-305.

McCollow, J. (1992) Integration Policy Meets Crossroads, *Queensland Teachers' Journal*, 15 (10), 13.

Slavin, R., Karweit, N.L., & Madden, N. (1989) *Effective Programs For Students At Risk*. Massachusetts, Allyn & Bacon.

### ADVANCE NOTICE

## 1993 Conference Proceedings

# TOWARDS 2000: SCHOOLING THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION

Edited by Dan Riley

Available NOVEMBER 1993

Cost \$35-00 per copy

Orders to  
SPERA Conference Proceedings  
P.O.Box 379  
Darling Heights  
Toowoomba  
Queensland 4350