

**ISOLATED SCHOOLS PROJECT**  
**Erica Vance & Paula Sullivan**  
**Faculty of Education**  
**University of Southern Queensland**

The Isolated Schools Project provided the opportunity for six University of Southern Queensland student teachers to experience teaching in rural areas in the North and South West regions of Queensland. The project offers students experience in a broad range of areas including: multi-level planning and timetabling; pupil free day activities; and initial enrolment and administration procedures. These students have shown a keen interest in applying to teach in areas such as these upon the completion of their course. Over a two and a half week period, students experienced not only teaching in this type of setting, but also community life in general. All of the students who participated feel that it is important to highlight the fact that the teachers who provided places for them on this experience did so on a voluntary basis.

### **The School**

The two school communities that we visited were both located in the South West Region of Queensland. Both were one teacher schools with a similar number of students enrolled. It was refreshing and even surprising to observe the emphasis on 'having a go' and friendly rivalry at sporting competitions, rather than the 'win at all costs' attitude which is more prevalent in urban schools. As a result, the students were more willing to work together and encourage one another in all facets of their schooling.

One facet of teaching which was emphasised in these settings more than in any other that we have experienced is that it is vital that learning and school in general be fun and interesting for the children as well as relevant to their communities. When planning consideration must be given to the various age and ability levels, with particular focus on those children with special needs. This experience provided both of us with our first real opportunity to work with a gifted and talented child in one instance, and children who needed considerable remediation in the other.

The children in these schools are not academically disadvantaged by their geographic isolation. Both the technological and printed resources available to teachers and children rival those of many of the larger, urban schools. However, in order to access many of the facilities that our previous practical experiences had us taking for granted, it was necessary for teachers and children to travel considerable distances.

Initially the lack of daily opportunity for professional consultations was a daunting prospect. However after attending a principal's meeting for the principals in our respective clusters, it was discovered that even though these teachers only meet for a short period of time, a considerable amount of discussion in relation to various ideas and their implementation occurs. An enormous amount of professional support is also given throughout these meetings and at other times.

A high standard of communication with parents and other principals is vital and as with the implementation of the curriculum, the emphasis is on the presentation being as fun or interesting as possible.

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## **The Community**

During this experience it was discovered that the community involvement varies widely across the communities depending on the teacher's style. As a result, the importance of teacher/parent interaction on both professional and social levels was emphasised. In general, parents displayed a genuine desire to become involved in school activities and to assist and encourage their children's learning. This was particularly evident by the way in which school activities, such as sporting events and working bees, concluded with a social gathering of some description.

It was refreshing to have parents show no hesitation in coming forward to meet and welcome you into the community, instead of almost totally avoiding contact with student teachers as has often been the case on previous practical teaching experiences. In fact, the parents made us feel as if we were a part of their community and appreciated our small contribution to the school and the community.

This experience served to confirm the decision to apply for rural teaching positions for all those students involved. The general consensus amongst participants is that this program provides an invaluable insight into teaching in an isolated community and complements previous practical teaching experiences. The benefits of this program far outweigh the disadvantages of a shorter summer vacation.

