

A NOTE ON CURRENT NEW ZEALAND RESEARCH IN RURAL EDUCATION

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At Victoria University of Wellington several rural education research programs are in process, covering a diverse range of subjects ranging from short term projects to a ten year longitudinal study. Most of the projects relate to the application of new communication technologies in remote schools and the outcomes of educational policies for isolated learners.

1. Information Technology for Teachers in a Rural Community

The New Zealand government recently funded four strategically located secondary schools as "technology centres", one of which is a North Island rural school, to enable them to assist other schools upgrade their use of information technology across the curriculum, promote the professional development of teachers and apply new communication skills to management. Each of the four schools received \$NZ400,000 to develop as technology centres, and as such, act as "lighthouses" within the education system.

This study is based in the rural school which received government funding to develop as a technology centre and will investigate the outcomes of the application of information technology across the institution itself and the extent to which it becomes a rural educational "lighthouse" through the development of networks. It is hoped that the study will subsequently be extended to an examination of the contribution of this technologically up-graded school to the economic development of the rural community within which it is located.

2. Rural New Zealand Education in the Context of Recent Reviews

Over the last decade the New Zealand education system has changed from being highly centralised to one in which management responsibilities are largely devolved to individual schools. The administration of New Zealand schools is now the responsibility of elected boards of trustees who are the employers of teachers. Trustees also have some responsibility for the administration of the curriculum in their schools. The many reviews of education in New Zealand during the last decade, with the exception of two small reports (Macaskill, 1991; Skene, 1990), have not focused particularly on the administration and the needs of the many small, rural schools that have been so much a feature of the education system in this country for the last hundred years. This study investigates the impact of the educational reviews of the last ten years on the administration of small rural schools in New Zealand and considers the implications for rural communities.

3. Vocational Choice in Rural Secondary Schools

Vocational choice is a significant issue in rural New Zealand (and Australian) schools and this study in a large rural secondary school investigates ways in which parents and their sons and daughters locate and use vocational information about careers and lifestyles that are often urban and unfamiliar. Earlier investigations in Australia have shown that the school and teachers play little part in this process. This study replicates earlier research in Queensland (Stevens, 1988) and, more recently in Western Australia (Stevens and Mason, 1992; 1993) in the context of New Zealand,

which in rural educational terms, is more closely related to Tasmania and Victoria than to Queensland or Western Australia. The research will enable the extent to which geography contributes to vocational isolation to be compared in different contexts (Queensland/Western Australia with New Zealand) as well as providing a cross national dimension to an important but not well documented aspect of rural secondary school education.

4. Case Studies of Rural School Management

The extent to which principals in small rural New Zealand schools are using modern communication technologies in management, the enhancement of the curriculum and for the professional development of their teachers is the subject of a study funded by Victoria University of Wellington. Case studies are being made of six small and remote secondary schools from the far north of the North Island and in the South Island of New Zealand. It is expected that this project will use information from project (1.) and together they will become the basis of a larger study to investigate the outcomes of a recent Ministry of Education initiative to up-skill New Zealand primary and secondary school teachers in the use of information technologies across the curriculum throughout the 1994 school year.

5. Shared decision making in Rural Schools

The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) is financing this study in collaboration with the University of Chicago at Illinois in which shared decision making is being investigated in selected urban schools in Wellington and Christchurch as well as in four small rural schools in the far north of New Zealand (north of the city of Auckland). The evolution of the decision making processes in each school over a two year period is being explored by recording all significant decisions that are made, identifying the decision makers, the originators of each decision, the evolutionary stages leading to a particular decision as well as the proposed and the actual results of them. In each school reactions to shared decisions that are made are then monitored. A standard questionnaire is administered in each school once a term (three times each year) together with a set of questions that allow more open ended responses to current issues, from which a profile of shared decision making is constructed. Each profile contains the perceptions of the school as an institution by various sectors: teachers, ancillary staff, boards of trustees and students. By examining shared decision making, perceptions of each school as an institution and information about its relationship with its community is being generated. Analysis of shared decision making provides insights into the management style of each institution, something that is of particular interest to New Zealand educationalists since the devolution of the administration of the school system.

6. Rural Schools and Economic Change

The educational implications of the social and economic changes that have taken place in New Zealand since 1984 are being investigated in this ten year longitudinal study funded by the Ministry of Education. Several assumptions underlying recent changes in education are being examined: that market competition will create more efficiency, higher educational standards, fairer educational provision and better links between schools and the workforce. Each of these assumptions is being examined through researching the longitudinal impact of the educational reforms on students, parents' school choices and outcomes in terms of whether there are improvements in the quality and standards of education, whether greater fairness results and whether better links to employment develop. Particular attention is being given to changes in family background (eg structure and employment) and involvement in students' education, choices in education and employment that open for different social classes and ethnic groups and to the effectiveness of school policies for different families.

Rural educational research is important in both Australia and New Zealand because of the continuing rural basis of each economy. There is at present no specialised rural education degree for in service teachers in New Zealand as there is in Australia, although at Victoria University of Wellington there is a graduate course available for both honours and MEd students. Several doctoral students have recently begun work in this field and in time their research will be added to the rural education literature. It is to be expected that, with developments in communication technologies, increased sharing of rural education research information between each country will result, and possibly there will also be some sharing of course materials.

In the meantime, engaging in rural educational research remains a rather lonely pursuit in New Zealand and contact with Australian researchers either by visits or correspondence will always be welcomed.

References

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