

## SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES AND THE IMPACT OF RAPID CHANGE

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Global changes in economic systems have put new demands on education as governments are endeavouring to maintain and improve services with reduced capital. The burden for health, welfare and education is increasingly being shifted towards the communities they service and the rate at which this shift can be made has accelerated with the growth of information technology. In Australia, government education policies are moving towards self management in schools. While an educationally sound case for self management and greater school autonomy has been argued widely (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988, *passim*), the rate at which self management is being introduced is strongly economically driven. The changes that are taking place are demanding greater parent and community support in schools.

The writer has been undertaking longitudinal research in four small, Victorian, rural schools. Victoria had been moving towards self management in schools for a decade. Reorganisation had taken place that led to the formation of districts, a strategy devised to ensure the provision of a comprehensive education within districts rather than schools, but with the oversight of curriculum provision also moving from schools to districts. These districts, comprised of many primary and secondary school communities, were asked to formulate solutions to the conflicting problem of providing quality education and reducing expenditure. When a new state government was elected in October 1992, the process of change was rapidly accelerated. Small schools had been targeted as economically inefficient. While 13 small schools were closed between 1985 and September 1992, 55 more were closed within months of the new government's election.

Shortly after the election the Government also announced a self management proposal for schools titled "Schools of the Future". The design of this proposal suggested a scale of complexity of operation beyond that available, or necessary, for the effective management of small schools. During this same period, teacher employee numbers were targeted for significant cuts and the government introduced, and vigorously promoted voluntary retirement packages. In schools, staffing entitlements were reduced and principals were asked to name staff in excess of entitlement. Teachers named in excess were placed in a pool for relief of short term staff vacancies. New teaching staff were employed on short term contracts for the school year, rather than the calendar year. Considerable power was invested in a newly appointed class of 'super principals' called District Liaison Principals, who were made responsible for the many schools in their districts. Schools Support Centres were closed across the state, regional staffs were rationalised and regions consolidated.

In this climate of extensive budget cuts, many school programs were put in doubt for the 1993 year. Changes particularly affecting small schools included reduced staffing ratios, the loss of reduction of shared specialist programs and the threatened loss of mobile area resource centres and mobile art centres (MARC and MAC units). These centres serviced clusters of small schools with library, science, art, craft and teacher resources as well as providing classroom teachers with release time by the provision of a library or art specialist. Staffing ratios and specialist entitlements were reduced but vigorous lobbying of country parliamentarians, by rural communities, ensured the retention of the mobile resource centres. However, the Ministry of Education indicated that greater burden for the future retention of these centres is to pass on to the communities which they service. When this occurs it will be the communities who must elect to retain or terminate them.

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In 1993 a new policy was issued-outlining how schools and the Department of School Education would examine the existing arrangements for curriculum and facilities and many schools were placed in Task Force groups to do this. The policy document outlining the process, The Quality Provision Framework (DSE 1993), stated within the three main justifications for its development, that : "In rural areas, significant improvements to transport, roads and communications mean that many communities are no longer isolated as they once were". It also stated in this brief justification that "The consolidation of schools will lead to an extended period of stability, more viable schools and better provision of curriculum facilities". The implication that rural communities drew from the document was that small, rural schools were at risk of closure or amalgamation. By the end of the process, in October 1993, nearly one quarter of the schools "task forced" were merged or closed while many others were annexed to larger schools, losing their administration and autonomy. In total, 159 more schools were closed in 1993 as a result of the process. In the rapid implementation of policy, three main trends could be identified.

- a. the more economical use of scarce resources;
- b. a move towards consolidation, and
- c. an ambivalent emphasis on community. While communities were being asked to take a greater role, the importance of the school to communities was apparently being disregarded.

This paper puts the view that small rural schools have unique community-school links. Community-school links are important and should be improved and encouraged regardless of location. However, the link in rural areas is usually greater because most small, rural schools are the centre of their small community. They provide the community with their social and cultural centres, meeting places, sporting facilities and community education resources. They often socialise new families into the community. They spend money in the community, determine family travel patterns which support local trade and employ local people. School staff may involve locals in educational debate and promote community interest, introduce new ideas and skills and influence the community beyond the school. The school usually helps to maintain confidence in the community Its closure causes loss of community confidence and is often seen as the symbolic end of the community.

Because of the importance of the school to the small, rural community the Commonwealth Schools Commission has stated that 'school systems should keep small, rural schools open wherever possible and they should maintain, and where feasible, even extend the networks of schools throughout rural Australia' (Commonwealth Schools Commission Report, Schooling in Rural Australia, 1987). Research on the school-community relationship, by the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 1980), indicated that there was a significant relationship between the strength of the community-school link and the definability of the community. This research also found that, where geographic integrity is put aside and children are brought together from different communities to one campus, the level of involvement of parents in a consolidated campus is considerably reduced. Self management in schools requires strong community involvement and this community support is considerably weakened when closure occurs or schools are forced to combine operation with other small schools.

The writer has been recording the effects of rapid change while researching small rural schools in Victoria. Two of the case study schools have been selected to illustrate the impact of change of these small, rural school communities. The first case study school is a rural school near the perimeter of a predominantly urban region. Being part of such a region, it does not qualify for equity funding assistance from the Commonwealth Country Areas Program (the Victorian version being the Country Education Project). It is more than 120 years old and some children in the school are second and third generation of their family to attend the school. This is a mixed farming area just beyond the fringe of the outer suburbs. The school also served families on an

urban housing estate some five kilometres distance until a large school was built on the estate 15 years ago. Some families have preferred to send their children to the small, rural school and this has led to a distinct dichotomy in the school community. Half the children are from the urban estate and half are from farming families in the rural location. There is strong community involvement in the school from both groups. The school community is very active in the school, through curriculum support, fundraising, social events and buildings and grounds maintenance. There is a family atmosphere and a sense of community ownership of the school.

The school has undergone relatively high staff turnover for several years and for many years had male head teachers. There was expressed preference for this. In 1991 a female head teacher was appointed, which led to expressions of concern from a few members of the more conservative, rural community. The school council, sometimes termed the 'fathers' club', had traditionally a mostly male membership, while the females of the school community were mostly involved with the mothers club. In recent years the school council membership had changed to a more equitable gender balance and the relatively long serving members provide a stability that somewhat offsets the high teacher turnover. Rumours at the end of 1992 that the school had been marked for closure prompted staff at the school to join a statewide strike to protest education budget cuts. This met with firm opposition from some members of the more conservative rural community while the urban families generally gave strong support to the teachers on this issue. This tended to divide the community. Through to the end of 1992 and in early 1993 the head teacher, an experienced administrator, attempted to explain many of the rapid changes that were being implemented and the necessity of the community to become increasingly involved in the process of self management. A few members of the rural community, male and female, interpreted this as characterising a gender inability to cope with the role of head teacher. The rapid rate of change does not seem to have allowed sufficient time for the community to accommodate the concepts of shifting responsibility.

The climate of uncertainty caused loss of confidence in this school. At the end of 1992 the staffing at the school was three fulltime classroom teachers and a shared music and art specialist, who was employed at the school for two days per week and shared for the balance of the time between two other small schools in the area. Enrolments dropped in 1993 and the head teacher had to place one of her fulltime staff in excess. This teacher approximately forty years old, was transferred into the excess pool. She suffered considerable loss of morale and applied for and got a voluntary retirement package in late 1993. The burden of teaching and administration increased on the head teacher. The School Support Centre which had been providing support on community relations, closed. The head teacher put forward a works program proposal in school council. Concerns were raised that requests for funding to the Ministry would put the school at greater risk (These works were eventually undertaken and completed in 1994) and the proposal met with vigorous opposition from members of the rural community. There was some condemnation of the head teacher over this issue and the situation led to further loss of cohesion in the school community. Staff morale was very low. The head teacher, in her early forties, applied for a voluntary retirement package but asked to be able to stay until the end of first term to ensure some continuity of curriculum. The request was refused because of the increased administration burden and the tension within the school community. The head teacher was replaced by an urban based teacher from the excess pool. This teacher was inexperienced at administration. The teacher had no networks in small schools, and the Regional Office where she previously had some contacts had closed. The administrative burdens increased and much work was taken on voluntarily by the community.

In second term of 1993 the school was placed in a Task Force and asked to justify its existence. The feeling that closure was imminent increased and community confidence in the frequent meetings decreased. Community members were called to frequent meetings to prepare the Task Force submission and plan survival strategies. The morale of the whole school community appeared to be low during this time. Teachers reported effects in the classroom and some children, who were exhibiting academic problems, were taken out of the school part time in

fourth term of 1993 for private coaching with the former head teacher. In third term of 1993 the shared specialist, a woman in her early thirties, applied for and took voluntary retirement package and was replaced by a casual relieving teacher. The school survived the task force process. However, some valuable school council members and families left the school earlier than may have been expected and members of the school community expressed the view that this was due to the increased burden being put on the community. Enrolments reduced for 1994 and the shared specialist entitlement was halved. One positive aspect of this was that the school formed a new shared specialist network which was wider than 1993 (the specialist being shared between five schools compared to three). In 1993 the school council had voted not to become part of the Schools of the Future Program. After much debate, in 1994 they voted to join the program from 1995. Members of school council expressed fears that the school would be more vulnerable to closure if they did not join. In 1995 the school shared specialist network broke down as the contract specialist was offered a fulltime contract at a large urban school.

The second case study school was a one-teacher school in a timber community. The nearest town was 25 kms away and the settlement had a store which was open for part of the week and served as a post office. The community was extremely economically disadvantaged. Many of the houses in the community were rented from the nearby mills at nominal rent, and were in poor condition. Most families in the school community worked for the local mills on a casual basis and one family lived on a local farm. Some of the families had been involved with the school for three generations. One member of the wider community was involved in the school, teaching art in a voluntary capacity, but otherwise community support in the school was very low for a rural area. The teachers of recent successive years reported that most of the community would only undertake work in the school if they were paid to do so. The prevailing attitude was that the school was the Government's responsibility. School Council had tended to rubber stamp policies drawn up by the teacher and had shown reluctance to discuss policy. Because of this, the burden of rapid change in 1993 fell heavily on the teacher.

The school, however was seen as the heart of the community and the community had strongly resisted efforts by the Regional Office to close it. The school teacher of 1992 helped direct efforts to keep the school open and expressed the view that the school was important to the social well being of the community. This teacher commuted to the school for the school week and travelled 150 kms to his home on weekends. Teachers generally had not stayed beyond a year at the school. In 1993 a new teacher settled in the community, with a family. This teacher extended community-school relationships and undertook community activities including self esteem programs and support programs for young mothers. The teacher displayed considerable skill in gaining local government funding for community works and maintenance. She produced a community newsletter, called community meetings in the school and began to involve a small number of people in policy making.

During 1993 the teacher began to feel the loss of the School Support Centres and support networks. Fortunately the teacher was able to draw much support from the Commonwealth Country Education Project network. The school was placed in a Task Force in 1993 and the outcome was the closure of the school at the end of 1993. This was despite meeting minimum enrolment requirements for 1994. The community expressed the view that the closure would lead to the community's eventual disintegration as had happened in another timber community, 20 kms away, when the school there had closed a few years earlier. From 1994, the children who were mostly lower primary school age, were bused on logging roads, to the nearest town, 25 kms away. Parents expressed concerns about safety. Several families have drifted to large towns since the closure. The postal branch was also marked for closure in early 1994 and the store owner purchased an agency licence at considerable personal cost to maintain postal services for the community. Closure of the school was followed by an unfortunate fire at one of the three town mills. A second mill closed due to the inability of the owner to retain stable, family men as workers because there was no longer a school in the community. The population of this community has reduced from over 200 people in 1993 to about 35 people in 1995. Although

some of this population decrease was inevitable due to the decline in the timber industry, the process appears to have been considerably accelerated and extended by the closure of the school. This community is mostly a sub-culture of itinerant timber workers whose families have lived and worked in the general region for over 100 years. They exhibit considerable socio-economic disadvantage. As their communities are closed they lose their natural family and community support structures and they drift to large towns where they live as fringe dwellers.

### Summary

Those who implement policy need to be aware of the cultural circumstances of school communities. The small, rural school is the major focus for many communities and it serves purposes beyond its primary role of educating the young. To facilitate a successful transition to self management, community support must be maintained and extended. Closure and amalgamation weakens the school-community link and it can also be weakened by the rate at which change is implemented. Small rural communities are by nature conservative and generally monocultural, making them more resistant to change than urban communities and they have fewer people to share the burdens of change. Because of these factors they need more time to organise for, and accommodate change. Because of these factors they need more time to organise for, and accommodate, change. Policy makers are faced with what can be seen as two contradictory tasks; to increase the quality of schooling and to reduce expenditure on it. This contradiction has given rise to an ambiguous emphasis on community. Those who implement policy must be mindful of the importance of community.

Networks of support are of enormous importance in a time of rapid change. The greater the networks of support the more resources the school has for coping with change. In planning staffing entitlements, the role of shared specialists in providing links between schools needs to be taken into account. In the case study schools and other small rural schools that the writer has been associated with, the specialist role has often, in 1994 and 1995, been filled by casual relief teachers employed for single afternoons at a reduced cost. Many of these teachers work only in the one school and the valuable networks formerly provided by shared specialists have been broken or diminished. Rural school communities need more opportunities to forge formal and informal links. Opportunities to network are restricted by time which, for an administrator or teacher in a rural school, is a luxury, and therefore technologies which can increase networking must gain greater emphasis at rural sites. In the course of the research it became apparent that far greater support is needed to educate rural teachers in the effective use of communications technology.

In the second case study the major burden for responding to change fell on the teacher. This was a community with a long history of high teacher turnover. The teacher of 1993 was beginning to build effective channels of communication with the community, and had begun to actively involve this community, for the first time, in curriculum and policy planning. At this critical time, rapid policy change was being implemented that required a level of engagement for which the community was not yet ready. Change needs to be communicated to communities in terms that are accessible to them and which will empower them to respond. The discourse if designed for an educated, urban community, may not be absorbed with confidence and clarity by members of other groups and will affect the enthusiasm with which the community becomes involved in the process of change. The other case study school may have been advantaged in this regard during the Task Force process since it had an articulate, professional person involved as community representative. The degree to which a school administrator knows the community and is able to communicate with its members also affects the quality of response to change.

Lack of empathy and information about the community's needs in case study two may also have had an impact on the outcome of the Task Force process. It might have been expected that the social and cultural importance of the school to this disadvantaged community would have merited far more support at local, state and federal government levels than was given. Social

problems are best addressed within the support of a community situation. Movement of population out of this settlement will mean loss of community support, and much of the need may have to be met by welfare organisations in large towns at increased economic cost. Social effects of school closure on small rural communities can be far reaching and long term.

Gender issues arose in the study. Communities of small, rural schools are usually characterised by a far more distinct division into traditional gender roles than urban communities. There was often an attitude reflected in the case study communities that a male head teacher had more authority and was better able to handle the children, especially the boys, than a female teacher. During interviews with the school community members, gender issues arose in both the case study schools. Community members were far more conscious of gender issues where there was a female head teacher.

In a period of rapid change it is important for educators and planners to monitor problems that arise. The policy of promoting Voluntary Retirement Packages may need to be reviewed because there are no processes to filter the loss of knowledge and skills from the system. This has consequences, not only for stability and continuity of curriculum in small, rural school communities, but also impacts negatively on the established networks of support. The willingness of teachers to accept such packages may reflect lower teacher morale in a climate of rapid change. While the self management program claims to empower schools we must question being empowered or disempowered. Teachers in the case study schools expressed lack of input into the changes being thrust upon them. Teachers in small rural schools, often lacking regular contact with an extended peer group, risk becoming as alienated in this climate of change as their rural communities. The policy of employing teachers on short term contracts in schools is unlikely to promote an interest in building effective relationships with their communities, a factor that has far greater consequence for educational outcomes in small, rural schools than in larger and urban schools.

Economic recession and resulting rationalisation of regional resources and services has led to sense of disempowerment in rural communities, where the economic bases have been narrower. These communities have been hit harder by change and those that recover may be slower to do so than urban areas. Beyond its obvious educational function, the importance of the school to the small, rural community is enormous in social, cultural and economic terms. Self management requires strong community support and the quality of the support is directly related to a sense of autonomy and ownership. Consolidation and closure weakens this support. Planners, teachers and administrators need to take account of these factors when dealing with communities which already feel disempowered.

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