

# TEACHING IN A SMALL RURAL SCHOOL DURING THE 1930s: AN ORAL HISTORY

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This article reports on a person's recollections of teaching in a single-teacher school during the period 1937 to 1939. These recollections offer a rich and interesting picture of that time and, in addition, allow comparisons to be drawn with present day small school teaching experiences.

Recollection or oral history is a method of enquiry that is freely criticised. As documented by Spaul (1988) three common arguments are raised against the oral history procedure: one, it is unrepresentative and thus the reliability of the source can be questioned; two, evidence based on memory reconstructions can be challenged as too subjective; and three, interviewing can lead to inhibitions and distortions from the interviewee.

Despite these criticisms, the oral history procedure is currently enjoying a resurgence in educational research and provides a lens to view teaching in a small school during the late 1930s in rural New South Wales (NSW). The interviewee<sup>1</sup> was interviewed on three separate occasions from March 1994 till December 1994. Each interview ran for approximately one hour and notes were recorded throughout the interview sessions to allow for later analysis. The analysis was based on a series of coding steps known as open, axial, and selective coding (Neuman, 1991) and revealed six categories: (1) appointment to the far-west area; (2) description of the school setting; (3) teacher responsibilities; (4) characteristics of the student body; (5) curricular organisation; and, (6) departmental inspection. Each category of findings is discussed in the following section.

## Findings

### 1. Appointment to the far-west area.

Following a year's service on the central coast of NSW, and on reaching 21 years of age, the interviewee was appointed to the far-west area. As reported by the interviewee newly recruited teachers were required to do a stint of rural-based teaching:

The department [NSW Department of Education] demanded that as soon as practical you were to do at least three years service in western NSW, that is, beyond the Great Divide to the South Australian border.

The interviewee's teaching placement was at Yoolarai just off the Mid-western Highway near Goolgowi. The trip from the central coast was a lengthy and onerous one as illustrated in the next interview extract:

Not owning a car, I travelled to Sydney to Griffith by train and changed to another train (part goods and passenger) going north to Hillston. The station stops were often prolonged and because of a fierce dust storm [common during the summer months] I did not reach Goolgowi till late. At Goolgowi I made enquiries as to getting to my new locality which was some 20km away. I stayed overnight at Goolgowi in the hotel and next day sat in a dusty mail delivery car to be finally dropped off at a family residence which had been the previous teacher's abode.

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1. A summary of the interviewee's background can be found in the Appendix.

Apparently this journey from the interviewee's home to his new place of residence took about two days.<sup>2</sup> However, an extra salary allowance<sup>3</sup> was provided for working in the far-west area to counter inconveniences created by distance and isolation. Moreover, after three years of service in this area you were entitled to a school transfer close to the coast and/or nearer your chosen home.

## 2. Description of the school setting.

My first classroom was the local hall used for euchre tournaments each Saturday evening and dances and other activities on occasion. All the furniture had to be stacked in a corner of the stage each Friday, while Monday's start was to put things back in place.

The hall also had a fireplace, hatroom annex, and a covered verandah. In the playground adjoining the hall was a small building which housed two toilets. These toilets were ten foot deep cesspits and in the event of being no longer serviceable were covered. Parents then assisted in the relocation of the toilets.

Parents would dig a rectangular hole and move the [toilet] building to another site. A morning tea was then enjoyed by all.

Located next to the hall was a water tank used for washing and drinking purposes. Fortunately, this tank never ran dry during the three years that the interviewee spent at the school. Nevertheless, a number of other calamities did occur: first, a grass fire set by one of the students almost led to the destruction of the school hall; second, several small snakes creeping in the playground were killed either by the interviewee or senior students; third, severe dust storms, particularly during the February-March dry period, made the classroom very dirty and caused breathing difficulties; and last, the window box trapping of both black bush and blow flies during the summer vacation created not only a mess but an awful stench.

Being greeted by this unpleasant scene and odour of dead fly and maggot mix on return from my holidays made me question, for at least a short while, whether or not this was my rightful calling.

## 3. Teacher responsibilities.

Apart from this specialised cleaning task, it was the interviewee's responsibility to maintain a clean, tidy classroom and presentable grounds. A broom and dusting cloth were used daily and rubbish was burnt sporadically. During the winter months a fire had to be kept burning to warm and dry shoes and pieces of clothing if moist. Electricity was not available at this time; however, a battery-operated radio permitted one-way contact with the 'outside world'.

Another duty assigned to the teacher was playground supervision. Only small pieces of equipment were utilised including skip ropes, bats, and balls. No large climbing apparatuses were available at Yoolarai, although these were often on hand in larger schools. During breaks the children would sometimes spend time exploring their surroundings and playing with small native animals. The following quotation exemplifies this pastime of the children:

Sometimes the children would partly tame wildlife and it was not uncommon for blue-tongued lizards and magpies to be student pets.

2. A similar trip in a car today would take about nine hours.
3. The interviewee's annual salary was £267/17/11 in 1937.

Plants in the school's small garden plot needed attention and, with supervision from the teacher, were used for a variety of teaching purposes. However, these colourful and aromatic plants did attract many birds such as cockatoos and green parrots during certain times of the day and could be a distraction.

A further responsibility of the teacher was to complete a quarterly attendance return. During March, June, September, and December attendance information, including new enrolments, school transfers, and records on school leavers, had to be relayed to the Sydney Head Office for collation.

#### **4. Characteristics of the student body.**

Although the student population of Yoolarai was relatively static, some changes to the student cohort occurred as recounted by the interviewee:

Approximately fifteen students, ranging from grade 1 to year 2 secondary, were enrolled at the school. The common practice at that time was to stay on at school until fourteen years of age. All the students lived on farms and because they completed farming chores after school there was little time for extra studies, especially as reading was difficult under candle light.

Two senior students did a correspondence course by mail. Their work was directed and despatched to the Correspondence School in Sydney for marking.

Two pupils transferred after completing grade 6. A boy to an Agricultural School at Yanco accommodated at a reasonable cost. A girl was financed by her parents [wheat and sheep farmers] to attend a boarding school in Sydney . . . they were happy to meet the additional expense.

Throughout this period there was no demanded school uniform, but, only acceptable clothing was to be worn and shoes and socks were encouraged for safety reasons. The wearing of shoes was almost a necessity because nearly all students walked across fields and dirt roads to reach the school. Sometimes a student rode a bicycle to school; however, bicycles were only adult size and as a result it was more comfortable for students to walk. At very rare times, a student would arrive at school in a sulky. This mode of transport was used primarily by the mothers or older siblings as a means of carrying supplies obtained from the nearest town.

#### **5. Curricular organisation.**

Most of the interviewee's workplace duties could be executed between 9am and 4pm. Lessons began promptly at 9.30 am with the first ten minutes devoted to Physical Instruction. The interviewee recalls:

. . . the pupils would perform arm, leg, and trunk exercises following my lead and directions. The directions were simple commands such as up, out, 1, 2, 3, and rest.

Apparently, some years later, records and gramophones were supplied in primary schools and the teacher's daily physical instructions relied on musical accompaniment.

The remaining time before recess at 11am was allotted to Mathematics, Reading, and Spelling. Mathematics lessons dealt principally with the four mathematical processes (i.e., addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division). However, some time was allocated to the study of

Geometry. Reading lessons focused on three main aspects: one, word recognition drills; two, word usage; and three, reading aloud to an audience. The interviewee considered that Reading was the most critical subject area the students needed to master:

The future for those kids was farming and farm existence and they needed to develop their reading skills to promote communication and to enjoy their leisure time.

Spelling instruction revolved around daily routines leading to a final dictation and individual word test later in the week. Drills and rules practice were the main strategies employed by the interviewee to develop spelling expertise.

Activities undertaken during the middle session of the day (i.e., 11.15am to 12.30pm) related mostly to the Social Studies field. Lessons concentrated on Australian and British history and Australian geography (including work on geographical features, products, transportation, and the various states/ territories). The study of world geography also occupied space in a busy curriculum schedule. In an attempt to change focus during this teaching time between recess and lunch, formal handwriting lessons were introduced.

The final two hours of the afternoon were set aside for the following subjects: Written Composition, Art, Scripture, Sport, Singing and Musical Appreciation.

As told by the interviewee:

Written Composition lessons were presented most days of the week. Pupils would discuss their topics and then express their thoughts in words and sentences. These compositions were then marked. On return, the pupils would improve their work and produce a final product by the end of the week.

Twice weekly the students studied art techniques. The interviewee described how a variety of implements and materials were used to produce art works:

. . . line designs, shapes, and figures were drawn on different paper surfaces. Coloured pencils were used to create patterns and shading. Pastels and crayons were also utilised to produce work on dark sheets of paper.

Scripture books issued by the Department of Education provided the foundation for a study of religion. These books were made up pictures, expressions, and quotations and required the teacher to link these notions with the day to day experiences of his charges.

Every Friday afternoon for approximately one hour the teacher organised and supervised sporting activities (e.g., cricket and Australian rules football). As parental assistance was not freely available, the organisation of some games was difficult considering that the activity had to cater for children aged between 6 and 15 years. To compensate for the age variation and small numbers of participants, games were modified so a concentration on sporting skill development occurred. Not surprisingly, because of travel and isolation reasons interschool sport was not a feature of the curriculum. In fact, class outings and excursions were not on the agenda.

A final highlight of the school day came courtesy of the school's radio. Singing and Musical Appreciation were a result of school-radio broadcasts. Before leaving for home some students availed themselves of the opportunity to borrow books from the school library. However, the interviewee did disclose that the collection of books was restricted and keen students soon familiarised themselves with these works. It was obvious from the interviews that extending the more able students was made awkward due to resource limitations.

## 6. Departmental inspection.

Parents were rarely sighted near the school unless they were dropping off or collecting their children or involved in a working bee. In fact, this school and its surrounds were chiefly the domain of just one adult -- the teacher. The only other expected visitor to the school was the district inspector. He paid an annual visit and would stay just one or two days. His main tasks were to give a verbal test to the children, check their book presentation, evaluate a lesson, and demonstrate 'new' teaching approaches and materials<sup>4</sup>. At the end of his stay the inspector would furnish a report which was forwarded to the Department in Sydney. A duplicate was provided for the teacher to file. These exchanges with the district inspector led to some unique experiences for the interviewee. The interviewee was involved in a local inservice programme and the relocation of a school building:

The inspector was friendly and sympathetic and an excellent resource. In my last year at Yoolarai I was given the opportunity to help inservice teachers at Booligal, Hillston, and Lake Cargelligo. I was deemed an 'expert' in mathematics instruction and a role model for new teachers.

The district inspector was cooperative and willing to improve the school's facilities, so after two and a half years of my stay, the parents cleared an area nearby . . . a school room was brought from an area nearby not in use as pupil numbers did not warrant a teacher.

The relocation of this building attracted interest from the interviewee's predecessor. He had moved to the Sydney area but was finding the experience troublesome. Consequently, he approached the Department of Education to return to this now improved situation. Unfortunately for the interviewee, the teacher's request was approved and the school was handed back to the previous teacher. So, after approximately three years service at Yoolarai, the interviewee was asked to move. This move proved to be a positive one as the interviewee was given charge of the Murrah school on the south coast of NSW. The interviewee went on to spend 40 happy and rewarding years full-time in the teaching service. Following his retirement as a Deputy Principal at Coal Point near Lake Macquarie in 1975 he worked until 1992 as a casual teacher in a number of primary schools around the Lake Macquarie area. In total, he was employed either full-time or part-time as a teacher for just on 57 years. Perhaps some of these other teaching experiences might be related in a future paper.

## REFERENCES

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4. In those times, no approaches were made from 'educational salespeople'. This suggests that a market for games, toys, books, and other materials was not available or that 'potential' snake-oil salespeople did not venture this far south.

## APPENDIX

### Summary of the Interviewee's Background

The interviewee was born in 1915 at Teralba, NSW. He attended several schools in the Newcastle (NSW) area, completing his secondary education at the leaving certificate level with 1st Class Honours in Maths I, Maths II, and Chemistry. These results led him to receive a scholarship but never having studied another language course besides English he was ineligible to attend university (i.e., The University of Sydney) -- a ruling adopted from Oxford University. As a consequence, he enrolled in a two-year Teachers' College course in Sydney to train basically for junior secondary school teaching. Surprisingly, on completion of this course (1935), he was offered a teaching position in a two-teacher primary school on the lower division (grades 1, 2, and 3) at Kanwal near Tuggerah, NSW. Even though his training and preparation had little relationship to this position, he coped satisfactorily in teaching some 50 students for an eighteen month period. On reaching the age of 21 years he was appointed to the school which is described in the article.