

# PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCHING IN SMALL SCHOOLS

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a recent research project conducted in the North Western Region of New South Wales. It highlights the nature of the research site, the particular characteristics of the people and their roles and attempts to give a "feel" for conducting research in the bush. The first section of the paper outlines the research project, the characteristics of one-teacher schools, together with details of the research setting. In the second section data collection determinants and problems of the chosen longitudinal research method in relationship to the research project are presented. The third section describes the peculiarities of gathering data in the chosen rural region. The fourth section evaluates the methodology and identifies problems and strengths. This is followed by a brief description of the major findings of the research project. Finally the conclusions of the paper are presented.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the management of change in small schools: - in particular the approach to change employed by Regional office personnel and inspectors and cluster directors (field officers) when implementing Departmental policy changes in one-teacher schools, over a period of significant structural upheaval within a State education system.

The dramatic changes which took place in the New South Wales Department of Education in the early 1990s were brought about principally through the implementations of recommendations of two reports chaired by Dr Brian Scott. The initial report, *School Renewal: A Strategy To Revitalise Schools Within the New South Wales State Education System* (1989) was followed by the final report, *School Centred Education: Building A More Responsive State School System* (1990).

For the purposes of this study small schools were defined as Class 6 primary schools staffed and administered by one teacher and having a maximum enrolment of 25 children. In the North West Region of the Department there were 21 of these small schools in 1994 out of a total of 109 primary schools – some 19% of the total primary schools in the region.

Although small in number, one-teacher schools are important organisational units within an extensive education system, administered by a large bureaucracy, fulfilling a pivotal educational and symbolic role in their "feeder" community.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF ONE-TEACHER SCHOOLS

One-teacher schools are often said to be unique. Certainly, they are unique in having only one teacher, who is a teaching principal – responsible for all teaching and management of the school. They are also unique in being the only schools to consist of children ranging from kindergarten to year 6 in the one classroom. Other characteristics of the schools, whilst distinctive, do not necessarily make them unique.

In the North West Region of the Department many of the one-teacher schools are isolated from the larger population centres. The principal often lives in a residence supplied by the Department at the school site or may live relatively close by in a home he/she owns or rents.

Contact with pupils' parents, grandparents, and with other community members is often on a day to day basis, as when some parents bring their children to school and participate in school activities. Community support and involvement is typically strong and intense. This is demonstrated through attendance at functions of the school, e.g. sports day and the school concert, at which the majority of parents would attend, together with a number of grandparents and community members. Community representation on the School Council and/or Parents and Citizens Association often accounts for all families having children at the school. Any school function or activity tends to become a community function or activity. This close interaction results in the principal having an intimate knowledge of the children and their families. Consequently, problems are often solved quickly through understanding and consistent communications. It also suggests that principals are often expected to adhere to the preferred standards of that community – a source of conflict from time to time.

The North West Education Region, which is some 183,000 square kilometres (1/3 the size of France, and some 11,110 square kilometres larger than England and Wales combined) has an economy largely based on agriculture and contains 149 State Schools.

Geographically and topographically, the area is extremely variable – from tablelands of some 1400 metres altitude in the east, to plains country in the west with an elevation as low as 200 metres. There are only two provincial cities in the region, Tamworth and Armidale, which are approximately 100 kilometres apart and have 23,000 or more inhabitants. The remaining towns are widely separated and have populations which rarely exceed 10,000. There remain 21 one-teacher schools in the region, mostly in geographically isolated areas.

#### **SOURCES OF DATA**

The study investigated the approach employed by the Regional and field office personnel to ensure the implementation of departmental policy/change directives. Three separate samples of personnel in the North West Region of the Department were involved in each of the three series of interviews.

- a. Regional Office personnel as the initiator, or implementer, of change directives in one-teacher schools;
- b. Field Office personnel (District Inspectors and Cluster Directors) who were responsible for one-teacher schools; and
- c. The Principals of the one-teacher schools.

#### **DATA COLLECTION DETERMINATES**

The methods of data collection were determined by

- a. the nature of the data required
- b. resources available, including costs and time
- c. expected cooperation of those from whom data were sought

##### **(a) Nature of the data**

Data collected were qualitative in nature and involved structured interviews which were recorded in written form as well as audio taped. Data were collected during three distinct time periods (Pre Scott 1989-1990, Post Scott, 1 June/July 1992, Post Scott 2 June/July, 1993). It consisted of data based on the approach to change employed by Regional office personnel and field officers to bring about departmental policy changes in the one-teacher schools.

**(b) Resources available**

This study was a longitudinal study of some five years and so data gathering was able to be planned and conducted at a fairly leisurely pace. I had access to a reliable car and, whilst road conditions at some stages could only be described as impassable, fuel availability and accommodation did not present a problem. I took a conscious decision to bear the costs because of the desirable factors associated with the interview technique selected for this study. These factors are discussed later.

**(c) Expected cooperation**

Research activity associated with small schools seems to be rare, whereas some of the principals and teachers of larger schools complain that they are constantly requested to participate in such. For this reason principals seemed to welcome the opportunity to express their views and to have someone take a genuine interest in them and their situation. I had the advantage of being relatively well known by members of the teaching profession in the North West Region of the Department, having worked in an advisory or consultative fashion, with most of the Regional office staff, cluster directors and the majority of the teachers-in-charge. For these reasons it was expected that full cooperation from all individuals approached could be achieved. This expectation was realised. All approached were willing to participate in the research.

**PROBLEMS OF LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH METHODS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT**

Writers have consistently identified three main problems of longitudinal research methods. These include finding people who are willing to be interviewed a number of times, sample mortality and re-interviewing bias. Moser and Kalton (1971:140) stated:

*The chief problems of panels are the achievement of the initial sample, sample mortality and conditioning.*

The problem of achieving the initial sample referred primarily to the difficulty of having people willing to be interviewed over an extended period of time. In this research project, this was not present as a problem – those approached seemed only too willing to be involved.

Sample mortality (1971:141), whilst a concern, did not prove to be significant. Sample mortality is referred to by other writers such as Dooley (1984:238) as "attrition".

Miller (1991:169) referred to two main problems. The first of these was mortality (what Dooley called attrition) of respondents; he warned that since different sections of the panel may show different mortality rates, some danger of a biased sample arose. The second was "Re-interviewing bias" as the effect of repeated discussions on certain topics on the respondent's behaviour or attitudes towards these very topics. Thus the fact of being interviewed may in itself induce changes of opinion. Dooley (1984:238) referred to this phenomenon as "pre-test sensitisation", similar to Moser and Kalton's (1971:140) conditioning.

Summarising, Miller stated,

*nevertheless, studies have shown neither of these factors seriously endangers the use of the panel; it is a highly promising and powerful tool in the field of social research.*

## DATA GATHERING IN THE CHOSEN RURAL REGION - SOME PECULIARITIES

Gathering data was interesting, intriguing and, at times, humorous, but always rewarding. It can be rather difficult for a stranger to locate the schools in the isolated areas. Since the locals all know where the school is situated, it seems rather unnecessary to have signposts on all the roads close by. This seemed to be particularly true when applied to the one-teacher schools as just locating them geographically often constituted the initial challenge. For example,

*"You will not find Tuloona School on any map," said the district inspector over the phone, "but if you set your odometer at Boggabilla, travel exactly 43 kilometres on the Moree road, there is a turn to your right – travel 7 1/2 kilometres down that road and you will find the school."*

Directions given to me from a principal for a "short cut" were also challenging – "Go up this dirt road until you see a large green letterbox – turn right and travel through private properties over the cattle grids until you meet a T-road – turn right and you can't miss Yarrowitch school on your right."

Typically these isolated schools consist of a two or three-room school house, a shelter shed for the children, a teacher's residence, some shade trees, water tanks and school playground. Septic toilets are usually supported by the supply of bore water or river water. Drinking is usually restricted to tank water.

I quickly learned that travel was measured in travel time and not kilometres, as many factors influenced the time taken to travel from one place to another. Some of these were the condition of the roads, the weather (of the research site, since if there is even 4 mm of rain the black soil roads are impassable), stock being fed on the land between the fences and the road referred to as "the long paddock" during drought, the danger of driving into kangaroos and, to a lesser extent, emus. After one particular interview held in the residence of a principal, I had to travel after dark to another school residence for accommodation. It was only safe to travel at less than 60 kilometres per hour for the 80 kilometre trip as there were so many kangaroos close to the road. Being a period of drought, the kangaroos had come in from the paddocks to eat the grass close to the road.

At all times the "bush telegraph" was alive and active, since many of the principals informed me upon arrival that they had been told what time I had left the previous school. One principal told me that she would telephone the principal of the next scheduled school in case I got into trouble on the bad road – was she merely concerned with my well-being?

It is worth noting that these small rural school communities are often very conservative and close-knit, with many of the parents having attended the same school which their children now attend. In fact, it is quite common for schools to have third generation children attending with their grandparents still taking an active role in school affairs. The school is quite openly spoken about and thought of as the school of the community or "our school" as vocalised by the locals – and they mean this in a very real way. School activities quickly become community activities involving a large percentage of local parents and community members.

These factors can have a significant influence when changes are attempted in the school and often result in covert or overt resistance. Why change when the local school has catered very well for grandparents, parents and children for many years?

Rural communities place increased demands on parents at different times of the year and a principal quickly learns never to schedule a parent-community workday, sports carnival or concert at the school during harvest time if he/she wishes to have a good attendance. It is not

uncommon for some of the older children to fall off in attendance during harvest time. Nor is it wise, to the surprise of one inexperienced principal, to schedule a parent-teacher night which coincided with an important sporting event – in this case a Rugby Test between England and Australia. This love of sport is not restricted to one-teacher schools, of course.

Notwithstanding these comments, the P6 one-teacher schools are generally well maintained, well equipped and enjoy a high profile and excellent reputation in the isolated areas. Telephone, facsimile, computers and all manner of materials and equipment associated with teaching are found in these schools. They are well supported and continue to play a crucial role in the life of communities they serve.

## **EVALUATION OF THE METHODOLOGY**

### **Identified Problems**

The main problems associated with the methodology chosen centred on the geographic location of the schools, the relatively high costs of travel and accommodation, the time taken to collect the data, accommodating to the preferred interview times of the respondents and the large amount of data collected.

The geographic location meant a great deal of travel and, initially, some difficulties in locating the isolated schools. It also meant that many of the schools were difficult or impossible to reach on some days because of the weather. It was my intention to interview all respondents during a two-month period for each interview schedule and this meant a fair amount of rushing to meet the self-imposed deadline. This time period was imposed so that the responses would not be spread over a longer time period.

At times accommodation was also a problem. At Boggabilla, whilst I was attracted to try the local hotel called "The Wobbly Boot", a walk through the front bar was enough to discourage. A local caravan park was substituted. At other times respondents were most gracious, providing me with accommodation for the night.

Travel costs and the time associated with the data collection could be said to be disadvantageous, but I chose to bear the costs in order to obtain the rich interview information and close personal contact so important in this type of qualitative research. Certainly, accommodating to interview times suitable to interviewees meant some very early starts to the day, some very long trips between interview sites and many missed meals.

Eighty five structured interviews over a five-year period produced a large amount of data. A total of 18 questions were asked of each respondent at each interview schedule. A number of open-ended questions resulted in a large amount of additional data. The data were manageable but certainly took careful organisation.

### **Identified Strengths**

The major strengths of the chosen methodology were my ability to become informed and knowledgeable about the research site, the opportunity for me to become acquainted with, and gain an appreciation of, the respondents' roles and responsibilities, the richness, fullness and accuracy of the data, the ethical nature of the procedure, my acceptance by the respondents and their full cooperation, the convenience of the personal interviews for those involved and the assistance it provided me in interpretation and analysis of the data.

The decision to conduct personal interviews with the chosen Regional office personnel, field officers and teachers-in-charge/principals meant travelling extensively throughout the North

West Region of the Department. In fact, it involved a little over 15,000 kilometres and proved of considerable value in developing my overall knowledge of the Region. Having the ability to find the small isolated schools of the North West Region meant that the larger centres were very easy indeed for me to locate.

I became familiar with the geography of the region from the mountainous area of the east to the flat plains of the west, experienced the diverse road conditions and hazards and coped with the changing weather patterns. It also resulted in an appreciation of the Regional Office Tamworth, the field officers' working conditions and the particular isolation of many of the one-teacher schools. Driving through the region and meeting the respondents on site, made the whole experience more relevant.

This opportunity also enabled me to become aware of the less tangible but nevertheless equally important aspect of the climates of the Regional Office, the offices of the field officers and the one-teacher schools. An appreciation of the responsibilities of these three groups was gained and some of the problems and difficulties associated with their roles observed. The seemingly constant demanding ringing of the telephone interrupting the lessons of the principal and the full day's travel for one field officer to visit one of his outlying one-teacher schools of 11 children brought a new understanding and appreciation of the demands of their respective roles.

Data collected were rich in personal statements, anecdotes and opinions because of the personal nature of interviews. Respondents tended to provide data beyond the questions asked and at times went into detailed descriptions which may not have been provided if a questionnaire was used instead of interviews.

The accuracy of the data was ensured by personal interview and two verifications of the data – one immediately after the interview and a second time when the data summary was returned by mail to the respondent for verification. Taping of the interviews via audio tape was another way to ensure the data were accurate. No-one objected to the taping of the interviews. Ethical issues were considered carefully and catered for in the methodology. An analysis of the methodology in terms of the principles developed by Mason and Bramble (1978:355-358) illustrated that the methodology fulfilled the ethical considerations. I was vitally aware of the ethical issues associated with research and was careful when choosing and designing the methodology to take these ethical issues into account.

Personal interviews provided an opportunity for the respondents to express their opinions and share their thoughts. Many of the principals expressed their pleasure that they had been chosen to participate in a research study and some bemoaned the fact that no-one seemed to be interested in their viewpoints. This tends to be the opposite to some of the larger schools in the more populated centres, which seem to be inundated with researchers. All those chosen to be interviewed, with the exception of one person, were most willing and cooperative. The recalcitrant respondent, after the initial interview, became most cooperative for the proceeding two interviews.

Interviews were conducted at the convenience of the respondents – date, time and location. For the majority of the Regional office personnel and field officers, this meant the respondents chose a date and time and I met them in their office. A number of the field officers were interviewed at the one-teacher schools because they were visiting while I was in the local area. The teachers-in-charge/principals were interviewed on site at their schools, typically when the children were not there – this meant before 8.45 am or after 3.30 pm. I took great pains to accommodate the respondents' wishes and to take into consideration their considerable responsibilities and duties.

All these aspects of personal interviews conducted on site provided me with background knowledge of the research site, the communities, the Regional Office, offices of the field officers

and schools and the roles and responsibilities of the respondents. This knowledge proved invaluable in the interpretation and analysis of the collected data. It provided a context into which the data existed and to which I could relate and was familiar.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examined some of the challenges and rewards of conducting research in rural Australia. While challenges existed in terms of distances involved in reaching the respondents costs of transport, time committed and at times the danger to personal safety, the rewards were immense. Perhaps because of these challenges research tends to be limited in rural areas. Participants in this research project were eager to be involved, share their ideas and offer fine country hospitality. Researchers are encouraged to take on the challenges associated with rural research and in so doing reap the rewards.

It is my intention to present the findings of this research in a later issue of *Education in Rural Australia*.

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Brendan was a teacher at the U.N. International School in New York and Madang Teachers College, Papua New Guinea before taking up his appointment as Senior Lecturer at the University of New England. He has been involved in the International Executive Development Program since it began in 1988. This 12 weeks program caters for international students from Asia, the Pacific and Africa who hold management positions. Many of the participants are Principals of schools or hold senior positions in Departments of Education in their home countries. Dr. Nolan has been teaching in the Master of Educational Administration as a supervisor of dissertations and thesis for six years. His research interests include management of change and strategic planning. He recently conducted a feasibility study in Bhutan focussing upon the provision of basic resources to primary schools.