

Rural and Remote Professional Practice Placements for Children's Studies Students.

Stephanie Jackiewicz, Rosa Lincoln and Kristen Brockman.

**Edith Cowan University.
Faculty of Health and Human Science.
School of Community Studies.
Joondalup Campus. W.A.**

Across Australia there are many courses preparing graduates to work with children in various capacities, child care workers, teachers, play leaders and other positions too numerous to mention. Many of these courses recognise the importance of practical experience and have incorporated practical components within their courses. However, many of these practices are located in the city giving new graduates little practice in the specific needs faced by children and families in rural communities. In an attempt to address this situation one of these courses, currently operating in Western Australia, decided to incorporate a Rural and Remote Practice into its program. Each year this practice is offered in a different setting, depending upon the needs of the rural community. It would appear that there are four key stake holders in this practical arrangement, the students, the staff, the university and the community. All seem to gain a great deal from their involvement in such a practical experience. This paper will describe the type of experiences offered and look at the gains made by each of these stake holder groups. Unfortunately it is not possible to capture on paper all the golden moments that were had during these experiences and therefore a video and pictorial presentation accompanied the paper at the conference.

Professional Practice allows students the opportunity to explore potential careers, make the connection between theory and practise, meet licensing requirements, and prepare students for their role in the field (Ganser, 1996). Many graduates will be employed in the city and never work in the country, others will be posted to the country or choose to transfer to the country. Higgins (1992) stated that teachers placed in rural situations 'had little formal preparation' (p.1) for such settings. These graduates often have had no experience in the rural settings on which to base their career decisions. Boylan and Bandy (1994) stated that prospective rural employers should look for graduates with experience in rural settings. Many aspects of theory can be put into practice in the usual metropolitan placement, however, the rural setting offers new challenges to implementation of theory. A rural and remote practice goes a long way to helping students consolidate theory. It is possible for licensing requirements to be met in a variety of practical settings either in metropolitan or rural areas. Courses that prepare teachers should include a focus on preparing students for rural experiences (Higgins, 1992; Boylan and Bandy, 1994). Children's Services such as schools 'often serve as a cultural centre in the community' (Miller, 1995, p. 1) and graduates need to be prepared for this role.

These experiences have been immeasurable in terms of preparing students for the field and providing opportunities to put theory into practice, this connection is an important component of effective university teaching (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1993). Although it is possible in metropolitan practicals to put theory into practice, the colourful experience gained on these placements could not possibly be gained in any metropolitan setting. It is important to vary the context in which practical components of the course are offered, in an attempt to meet the varied needs of the students and develop a model of good teaching practice (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1993). This rural and remote program has certainly provided students with variation.

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This Rural and Remote Practical program has been operating for 3 years. It has been integrated into the practicum curriculum for Children's Studies as part of the commitment to integrate field work and to enhance student learning (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1993). The first of the Rural and Remote practises occurred at Sandstone, a town in Western Australia located 661 km North East of Perth. Sandstone was set to celebrate their Centenary and many activities were planned for the weekend. Families were returning to Sandstone from many parts of Australia to enjoy the celebrations.

Children's Studies, a subject offered at Edith Cowan University, became involved in offering this service by way of practical experience for the students. Due to the huge success of the Sandstone experience, the University was invited to repeat the experience the following year at the Wiluna Centenary Celebrations. Wiluna is located some 950 km North East of Perth, Western Australia. The town has a large indigenous population yet the official population is approx 200. There were many people returning to the town which was once a thriving mining town site with a population of approx 10,000. Much was planned for this celebration and it was decided to offer care for the children over the weekend, thus allowing parents to attend various functions. The Wiluna experience had been on a much grander scale than that at Sandstone and led to the next Rural and Remote Practice in Geraldton.

On this third occasion the brief was to provide care for the siblings, of the children from Meekatharra School of the Air. The parents were in Geraldton to receive training in home tutoring with their school aged children and needed specialised care for their younger children. Geraldton is port town located 424 km from Perth and hosts a large population of over 21,000. The children attending the service were from outlying stations and had little opportunity to come to a town such as Geraldton. Many had not been left in anyone's care ever before. As can be seen, the brief of each placement was very different and each one held its own set of challenges.

The Children's Studies subject takes an ecological approach to children and their families and these placements were an ideal opportunity to put this approach into practice. The ecological approach sees children developing not in isolation, but as part of a larger system. There are many influences upon children and each of these needs to be taken into consideration when dealing with children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is perhaps even more evident in a rural or remote locality where the impact of larger systems on individuals can often be more obvious because of the small community.

The students were dealing with a variety of children and families, often they were confronted with health issues, such as substance abuse, that had to be dealt with immediately. Decisions had to be made quickly and acted upon. This is unlike a metropolitan practice where there is always someone to refer the decision making too. Students in conjunction with lecturers were able to make sound decisions based on the context and using the ecological approach. Sometimes, given the setting, it was appropriate to make decisions that may not have been acceptable in the metropolitan area. For example, in the early hours of the morning, sleeping children were piled into the back seats of cars, during the day children were sometimes fed food which was not of adequate nutritional value. The theory had been learnt prior to coming on placement and now was the chance to put it into practice. This was a very empowering process for the students as they made the decision, acted upon it and were able to see the short term outcomes of their decision.

Something else students rarely gain experience in, is working with people from the Aboriginal culture. During the Wiluna experience students worked with many children from a fairly traditional Aboriginal culture, an experience they may otherwise never have had. Students were amazed to experience first hand the difference in the Aboriginal children's play compared to white Australian children. Their play was more spontaneous and free in their exploration of the environment. This fits well with the child initiated approach to play which is taught within the

course. The role of the adult is that of facilitator assisting the children as required. Students were able to see the benefits of this approach as the children naturally interacted with the environment carefully set up by the students and teaching staff. The students were called on to facilitate the children's play as the need arose.

Another group of children and families the students were exposed to were the children from outlying stations. These children had had little contact with other children or adults and for them this was an alien situation. Students had to plan carefully how they could integrate these children while causing them the minimum of stress, in a short period of time. The very young children from Meekatharra School of the Air came with their own unique set of needs. They needed to be cared for by strangers in the same way they would be at home. Students had to quickly adopt the primary caregiver system whereby one caregiver is assigned to a small number of children. They are then responsible for all the needs of these children for the remainder of their time in care. This system helps develop attachments between carers and young children. It is essential to develop secondary attachments in order for the children to feel safe and secure (Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer Eyer, 1993, p. 75; Hutchins, 1995, p. 46). However, the challenge was to meet the varied needs of these children. Some slept with toys or bottles, others did not sleep. Some went down early, others late. Some ate meals, others grazed throughout the day. Some were cuddled to sleep, others went into cots with or without comforters. Many of the children were used to the outdoors and not keen on playing inside. Students had to adjust to this rapidly in order to meet the needs of these children. In the case of outdoor play, this involved moving the entire indoor environment outdoors, a practice that rarely occurs in the metropolitan area.

Yet another challenge faced by the students was to provide care with limited resources. In many settings in the metropolitan area there is an abundance of resources. In these rural and remote localities, we were limited in what we could take with us, as space was at a premium on the bus or in the cars. Prior to arriving at places there was no telling what resources were available. Often we would arrive and promised resources were unavailable. This meant students had to improvise, an invaluable skill to acquire, for example cubbies were built from staff's sleeping bags to give children a quiet place to be away from the others, something that was important for children who were not used to being around large numbers of strangers. Another improvisation was Boot Scooting in the red dirt of Wiluna, a far cry from the polished floors of the city. When using premises which belong to others it is important to take good care of the premises and equipment and to respect others and their equipment. This is a useful skill for anyone entering the Children's Services field as sharing space is often necessary.

In addition to the benefits gained by the students, the staff accompanying the students on the program learned a great deal. The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (1993) stated that 'students expect and value their university teacher's competence in the subject areas they teach'. A criticism often made of academics is that they become locked away in ivory towers and forget what happens at the grass roots level. This program gives academics a chance to put the theory into practice and identify the problems first hand, that practitioners face. It also builds credibility with students who were able to see their lecturers in action and to see that the theory can be put into practice. It also offers an opportunity for staff to liaise with the wider community, promoting the University to a wider audience, one that is often neglected, the rural sector. Exposure to rural communities allows academics to identify the needs of such communities which enriches the teaching process when explaining theory to students and offers an opportunity to identify areas for research. This fits with the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (1993) belief that 'university teachers need to contribute to their disciplines... and integrate into their teaching the knowledge and understanding which they or others create' (p.2). Staff development was enhanced from these Rural and Remote Practices and so was the University's profile.

The University enhanced its image in Rural Western Australia through this program. There was a level of commitment within the University to:

- i) 'encourage students to participate in appropriate community activities;
- ii) establish strong links with ... communities;
- iii) be pro active in seeking to serve the needs of the community;
- iv) encourage the community to use the resources of the faculty;
- v) increase staff participation in community service activities;
- vi) increase the level of participation by community organisers in the activities of the faculty; and
- vii) be responsive to the community.'

(Edith Cowan University, 1997, p. 85 - 97)

These families and many other members of these communities became aware of the role the university plays, particularly in relation to the community. This is a role that is not often common knowledge and most certainly not to those who are physically isolated in remote localities. The University has established strong links with individuals and services in the rural and remote communities. As much as the University, staff and students have gained from this program, so too have the rural communities involved. This has been evident by the letters of thanks that have been received and the tears of joy at the end of each experience.

The community also gains from access to such a service. In rural Australia, access and equity to Human Services are both issues for families. This is particularly an issue for 'farm women [who] are ... amongst the most isolated ... in the country, physically, socially and in relation to learning opportunities' (Phillips and Richardson, 1994, p. 1). Usually access and equity focus on the constraints of availability and geography (O'Toole, 1995). In this case the University made available a service in a suitable locality which is part of the universities commitment to involve the community in their activities (Edith Cowan University, 1997, pp. 86 - 87). The service provided families with opportunities that would otherwise be out of their reach, for example, attendance at School of the Air tutorials and centenary celebrations. Many families had not been exposed to such a service and their understanding of these services was limited. Having now experienced one, their understanding of the role these services play is greatly changed, for the better. As many of these families are isolated they have limited opportunity to discuss child rearing methods and practices, this service gave them a forum that recognised there need to do this and which was willing to participate in their discussions. It also exposed them to alternate child rearing methods and ideas. The children had the opportunity to meet and play with their peers in a safe and welcoming environment that met their individual needs. An opportunity rarely afforded these children.

As can be seen there are several stake holders in this process and many winners. The students were given the opportunity to put theory into practice and further their preparation for work in the field. The staff enhanced their credibility with students and identified new research areas. The university enhanced their image in rural and remote Western Australia, as well as gaining from staff and students enhanced experiences. Finally the rural and remote communities gained through increased access to services and increased understanding of the role of children's services and universities. I wish everyone could experience at least one of these practicals because the experience is such a rich one and impossible to adequately describe on paper.

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