

Rural kid, rural adult, rural teacher: diary of an intern.

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My first day of school - I had been waiting for this day for a year. I couldn't wait for the day to come when I got to go to school with my older brother and sister, who were in secondary, and my other brother who was in primary. The day had finally arrived and I was so scared.

What was my teacher going to be like? Who else was going to be in my class? Were there any other girls? What do I do at school? As I had never gone to preschool I wasn't exactly sure what was going to happen.

The school, which I was to attend for the next 13 years, was a Central School. At the time I began school it went from Kindergarten to Year 10, (School Certificate). When I was in Year 8 the school began teaching the Higher School Certificate through Telematics with Condobolin, Lake Cargelligo, and Ungarie schools.

I need not have worried - My first day was everything that I wished for. There were many students at the school and I was placed in a class with 8 other children. I had a really nice teacher and there were lots of kids to play with. Except for school holidays, I was happy that this was where I was going to be for the next thirteen years. As I got older though I began to think that school was the last place I wanted to be. Everyone tells you that when you leave that you will want to go back and you always answer with 'yeah, as if!' Well, I wouldn't mind going back. I now realise that I had a fantastic schooling, with great friends. Because the school was small, everyone was a friend. I also found that the teachers were good friends too.

By the time I got to Year 11 there were four pupils and that dropped to three not long after the year began. We never had to worry that we wouldn't get our say, but we never got to blend into the crowd either. We had a mixture of classes. Some we would do with Year 12 and were left to go on with the allotted work. It didn't take the teachers long to realise that that wouldn't work as we spent most of the class laughing and joking around, but we did get our work done in the end. Some classes were spent in 'our room', where we did work sent to us from the Open Learning Centre in Dubbo, or from our teachers in the other schools in our cluster. If we had practical work that had to be done, we went to the computer room, art room or where ever it was necessary to carry out the task. We also had lesson by Telematics, which is communicating between remote schools by phone, computer and fax. For example, within our cluster, there were four schools; Condobolin, Lake Cargelligo, Ungarie and Quandialla. One of my lessons was 2 Unit Visual Arts. I was at my school and the teacher and her other students were in Condobolin, which is about 2 hours away.

As we had to be such independent learners at high school, I found the experience helped enormously when I went away to university. Just like school, the work was set and we had to get on with it or fail. Most of the time I was organised enough to get it done but I still left everything to the last minute. People often say, that if it wasn't for the 'last minute' nothing would get done, and in my case, this was very true.

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Despite my being fairly independent, my first day at university was very nerve-wrecking. Who would think that anyone would feel like a child on their first day of school at 17 years of age, but that's exactly how I felt. Scared, excited and nervous all at once. The same questions running through my mind as my first day at school; How many students would be in my course, lectures and tutorial groups? Would they like me? What would my lecturers be like? Where do I go? The university was huge. I got lost on my way to my first class and then I walked in thinking 'am I in the right room?' How embarrassing was it going to be if I was in the wrong room/class. When I finally found where I was supposed to be there were 21 girls all looking at me (or so I thought). I found this really hard, especially coming from a class of three where I was the only girl. I wondered how do you talk to girls? All my friends from school were guys and the talk was usually about farming. Things like how the farming season was going, how many sheep and cattle we had, lamb and calf marking, shearing, sowing, harvest and even hay making, were 'normal' conversation. I wondered how I could talk about that stuff with these girls! I decided it would be safer to wait and find out what they wanted to talk about. Easy!

At university I studied the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood). Part of this course is practical and in my first year I completed two one-week orientation practicums. I completed these at Forbes and Young, in central west NSW. One week was in a Kindergarten class and the other in a preschool. I enjoyed both of these settings and learnt on a practical side the programming and 'behind the scenes' of teaching. At the end of first year I also had a four-week block of practicum experience in a long day care centre in Orange, working with 3-4-year olds. This was a great chance for me to become even more aware of long hours, programming, observations, early childhood policies, working as a team member and being part of a working environment which centres around children. It was fantastic and it provided me with invaluable experience and knowledge of working with children.

My second year at university I asked to go to Merimbula on the southeast coast of NSW. My reasoning was so that I had a variety of locations to see which I preferred, coastal life or bush life. I went to a primary school in Merimbula, where I had a composite class of Year 1/2. There are four classes for Stage 1 and these classes were split for Numeracy and Literacy in ability classes. This was a great experience for me, as I wasn't teaching the same children all the time. I had a different class for Literacy and Numeracy and then my home class the rest of the time. I also helped the Kindergarten maths groups. This was the first school practice that I had been in, therefore the first time I had to put the K-6 Syllabus into action. I found that the working environment was fantastic for this task. The staff were helpful and pointed out small details that they would change and why they would change it. Their helpful advice was of great assistance and will no doubt stand in good stead in any teaching position in which I may find myself.

Last year I went to the opposite extreme of Merimbula and headed west to Bourke. I worked in the birth to three room at a childcare centre. This experience taught me about professionalism and ethical practice. It taught me about living in a town which is a long distance from a major town, and good old fashioned hospitality. I still have many friends in Bourke and the surrounding area. I loved it!

My final practicum experience had to be undertaken before completion of my university course this year. It was called my 'internship'. I travelled to the Northern Territory and taught in the Gunbalanya Community Education Centre, where the community elders were kind enough to allow me and another student to teach one of their classes. I was in the Transition / Year 1 class. Within this class there was an English as a Second Language for Indigenous Language Speaking School (ESI, ILSS) teacher and an assistant teacher. The community was 17km east of the East Alligator River (approximately 31km east of Darwin) in Arnhem Land, where a permit, organised by the Department of Education in the Northern Territory, was needed to enter the community.

The language spoken in Gunbalanya (Oenpelli, European name) is Kunkinjku, pronounced Gu-wing-gu. In my class the main aim was to teach the children oral English. There was an Aboriginal Teachers Aid who helped translate information to the children. Even with the local language being spoken, the locals had no trouble communicating with me in English. My eight-week stay at Gunabalanya was a great learning experience for me. The children were warm and friendly and most weren't shy. The staff at the school were open, friendly and made us both feel most welcomed.

My internship was the best experience that I encountered during my course. I learnt a new syllabus, a new form of handwriting and I was working with children who spoke English as a second language. The experience and what I learnt will stay with me throughout my teaching career. I also learnt the importance of family, custom, tradition and friendship and how all of these evolve into the Aboriginal way of life. The Aboriginal people were loving and generous people, with a wonderful sense of humour, who openly welcomed and accepted me into their community, for which I am truly grateful.

There are only two weeks to the completion of my course. My lecturers are finishing off by discussing the very important issues of professionalism and ethics in children's services. Since most of the students in my course are going to be teaching young children of different ages, we are going to influence children differently. We, as university students, have been affected by our lecturers and our colleagues and I feel we have been taught by example what professionalism and good ethical practices are.

We have been very fortunate to have lecturers who have shown us different dedications. They taught us to believe in children and their abilities and to see children as individuals. We have learnt to see children's strengths and not their weaknesses. We have been taught about children (and their parents) who have had to fight hard for their rights and we have come to respect them all as remarkable human beings. For this, students say thank you to all of our lecturers for showing us a passion for children, and teaching and learning. I, and my colleagues, can at last see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Also, over the last four years I have met 45 of the most remarkable women and one man I am ever likely to meet. We partied together, we stressed together and we were disappointed together; they are my best friends. Friends that I hope I'll have forever. They all have individual personalities and a great sense of humour. I have had the best learning experience a small town girl like myself could have had. Thank you.

Now, we make our way into the world and look for new jobs, new friends, new places and new lives. We will look back on our time at university, and remember the good, the bad and the ugly. We will think back and wish we were back here having a coffee or getting ready to go out and party. We will all return for reunions and keep in contact, but our lives won't be the same.

Many of us may end up in the same towns, or we will end up in our own home town or, we may even end up in a new town. Who knows! Ten years from now there will be those of us with families and new problems to encounter, but we will remember each other. For me, I have no idea where I'll end up. I use to know exactly what I wanted and where I wanted to be. But now, things are different. I do know one thing though. Small towns are where I want to teach: where the community members are like extended family; where I know everyone and what they are doing. Many people don't like small towns where everyone knows everything, but to me that's the best part. I want to walk down the street and know everyone I see (if I see anyone!). I want to stop and have a chat. Small towns come together in the bad times and help each other out wherever possible. We celebrate the good times. Small towns are my family, my friends, my community and that is where I want to teach. My rural home.