LADIES & GENTLEMEN, GIRLS & BOYS, GRANDPARENTS & COMMUNITY MEMBERS: WELCOME TO THE WOWAN STATE PRIMARY SCHOOL THEATRE RESTAURANT!

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the teaching staff from the Central Queensland school of Wowan State Primary School have been responding to recently released Education Queensland initiatives for whole school literacy planning, 'Literate Futures: Reading' (Education Queensland, 2002), and a framework for pedagogical reform, 'Productive Pedagogies' (Education Queensland, 2006). This article recounts one of their whole school showcase projects that exemplifies the innovative and connected ways this group of small school rural teachers are working to better students' engagement with the multiple demands of literacy in complex new times. Wowan State Primary School's 'Theatre Restaurant 2006' project was awarded a National Literacy & Numeracy Week Celebration Grant in 2006 for its effectiveness in creating real life literacy projects for its students and its connectedness to the wider community. This article also serves to contribute to the dearth of research on literacy in rural communities (Green & Reid, 2004; Reid, Edwards & Power, 2004) and correct myths that rural teachers are not highly skilled and fail to connect to their community (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Motley, Rossi & King, 2005) or that small multi-age rural schools do not provide exemplar practices worthy of national attention (see Sharplin, 2002; Jarzabkowski, 2003; Shelton, 2004).

THE WOWAN COMMUNITY

The township of Wowan is located within the Banana Shire of Central Queensland between the townships of Rockhampton in the north-east and Biloela in the south. The Banana Shire takes its name from a huge dun coloured bullock named 'Banana' that lived in the district in the latter part of the 1880s. The small rural township of Wowan, the Aboriginal word for 'Scrub Turkey', was settled by Europeans in 1912. Since then Wowan has had a remarkable history; living through the best of times, and surviving the worst of times. Wowan's glorydays as a bustling administrative and commercial centre have long passed. Coralyn Johansen, a long-term Wowan resident and currently the Acting Principal at Wowan State Primary School, recalls the earlier days:

> **Coralyn:** *Wowan was home to the council chambers, a butter factory, the cotton ginnery, a saw mill, what was then the PMG, and is now called Telstra, CREB, Capricorn Regional Electricity Board, a hospital, a billiard room, two hotels, two car sales yards, a hardware store, and three banks, Bank of NSW, the*

Wowan now has none of these services, save for one hotel and a shop. Local farms still focus on beef and dairy cattle and sorghum, barley, wheat and mung bean crops, but new times have also brought new organisations to the farms and the destinies of future generations. Like many Queensland communities, Wowan is experiencing the worst drought in 100 years. There is only sand and a few blanched weeds in the Rivers Don and Dee. Yet the teachers still make plans to lift all the furniture and resources in the ground level early years classroom should the seasonal flood waters arrive during the up-coming summer break. At an end-of-year afternoon tea at the school to thank the band of parent helpers, conversations turned to the impact of the long-term drought on farming operations and the angst about impending pumping restrictions from one of the few flowing local rivers. Coralyn, also a farmer's wife and part-time cattle farmer, explains:

> **Coralyn:** *To keep the farms viable, one farmer is buying out his neighbour and getting bigger, and their children are going elsewhere for work. So the farming population is mainly older people. The parents know there's not much future for their young kids on the farms and they want the best for their kids. They are willing to help the school to make sure they get the best. .*

A number of local schools, Bumera State School, Don River State School, Pheasant Creek State School and Deeford State School, have also closed and in 2006 Wowan provided Pre-school and Prep to Year Seven education for the district's 60+ primary school aged children in three multi-aged classes: Pre-school/Prep/Year One; Years Two/Three/Four; and Years Five/Six/Seven. Some of the students travel for up to an hour to get to school. All current teachers espouse a strong philosophical commitment to multi-age instruction, which includes out of necessity some cross-grade groupings and whole-class teaching (see Lloyd, 2002). Despite falling services, the community's spirit and support for education have surged ahead. Strong community advocates work in tandem with innovative and dedicated staff to ensure children at all levels are engaged in meaningful and rich literacy learning experiences.

A former pupil of Wowan State Primary School and now part of the teaching staff, Rachel Olsson, grew up on a cattle and crop property about five kilometres outside of town. She has recently purchased her own home in town and is committed to staying in the community. She describes the wider Wowan community as very pro-education.

> **Rachel:** *I've always found the Wowan community to be very supportive, very close knit. If anything goes wrong everyone pitches in. I went away for a while but I'm back here now and I'm really happy to be putting back into the community as an adult, as a teacher. It's not just the P & C, or just the parents, it's the wider community too. The [Dululu] publican will just drop everything for the school. He gave us chips to sell at the disco to make a profit for the students' fundraising. The multi-purpose centre helped us out. The Wowan pub does things for us. The Masons sponsor our 'Student of the Year' award. Out here if you don't support*

one another it all falls apart. We just have a pro-education community. They really value education. If the kids can't do their homework they'll phone up and say that they'll catch up. It's give and take. If the kids are out doing real work, picking pumpkins every afternoon, its finding that balance between home work and school work. If the kids come and say I don't need an education because I'm going to work on the farm, I'll say if you want to be a farmer you need to be: an accountant, you need to do the books; a scientist, you need to work out the pesticide formula; and a mathematician so you can work out the ratios for when you're planting your crop. The wider community love the kids doing things and there's a lot of extended families, and they say, 'That's my cousin, I'll go and watch that'.

The school is achieving above state averages for Literacy in state-wide standardized assessment items across all age groups, and in a strong statement of parent support for high level literacy outcomes, 100 percent of the early years students successfully completed the tasks set by the Queensland Premier's Reading Challenge. Support was not confined to the early years either, as Rachel reports:

> **Rachel:** *There is a band of parents who support anything we do wholeheartedly. We've had four grandparents in for National Literacy & Numeracy week in August, to sit and read with the students. We even had a great-grandmother come in. It was great to see all generations involved in the school.*

MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL CURRENCY IN A SMALL RURAL SCHOOL

Like their counterparts throughout the state, the Wowan State Primary School teachers need to maintain currency in their professional practice to ensure they serve their students and communities well. 'As early as 1919, Mackie was arguing that "[t]he young rural teacher working alone requires a better not a poorer training than that of the class teacher working with other members of school staff" (cited in Green & Reid, 2004, p. 265). The quality of a teacher, and their access to quality training and development, continued to be recognised as being key factors in any student's education achievement (MCEETYA Taskforce, 2001). Recent findings into teachers' perceptions of professional development opportunities for rural and remote teachers in three Central Queensland districts of Education Queensland (Motley, Rossi & King, 2005) were that teachers from small schools have significantly less opportunities than teachers from larger schools due to the difficulties with time for travel, attendance at events and costs for teacher replacement, registration, travel and accommodation (see also Jarzabkowski, 2003). Moreover, research published in an earlier edition of *Education in Rural Australia* (Motley, Rossi & King, 2005) found there was a belief that these sessions were either metro-centric or generic and not targeted to rural and remote teachers' needs.

The teaching staff at Wowan State Primary School concur with these findings, citing the difficulties small rural schools have with accessing teacher professional development sessions. Despite being geographically closer to the rural township of Biloela, and the major regional centre of Rockhampton, their systemic administrative hub is considered to be Gladstone, some 50klm further

away. Thus attending teacher professional development is an onerous exercise for these rural teachers, especially when they have to make alternative arrangements for the morning and afternoon farm duties they are unable to fulfil and also to get their own children from an outer-lying property to school and back.

Another issue that impacts upon the amount and range of activities teachers can be supported in attending is that of staff organisation. At Wowan State Primary School half of the teaching staff is part-time, not so much by choice, but by demand. One single female teacher who was seeking full time work had to survive on a part-time appointment for six months until the temporary reappointment of the school's Principal to another school enabled her to be temporarily upgraded to a full time appointment. There are two important points to be made here: the insecurity of appointments or underemployment disheartens teachers seeking a secure career trajectory (see Motley, Rossi & King, 2005) and systemic professional learning budgets are based on equivalent full-time appointments. Thus there are more teachers to in-service at Wowan State Primary School than the budget effectively caters for. Finally, small schools are further disadvantaged in that they can only ever afford to release one teacher at a time, unlike large schools where two or more teachers can attend the same professional development session and then benefit from continued conversations across time. Small school teachers are forced to work alone to re-present the in-service experience to their peers, and usually without the benefit of discussing their interpretations of the program with colleagues who have also attended.

Not to be deterred by these difficulties, and not wanting to draw on limited school budgets, the Wowan State Primary School teachers often fund themselves to attend sessions hosted by volunteer Teacher Professional Associations outside of school hours in regional Rockhampton.

SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORKS: 'LITERATE FUTURES: READING' & 'THE PRODUCTIVE PEDAGOGIES'

In recent years, the teaching staff from Wowan State Primary School have been responding to recently released Education Queensland initiatives for whole school literacy planning, *Literate Futures: Reading* (Education Queensland, 2002) and a framework for pedagogical reform, *Productive Pedagogies* (Education Queensland, 2006).

Core to the *Literate Futures: Reading* document is the foundational principle that literate individuals have to have available and be able to draw on code breaking, meaning maker, text user and text analyst resources (Luke &Freebody, 1999) for multimodal texts. The four resources of literacy users can be realised through teachers working with students to consider or become aware of the following (Education Queensland, 2002):

- **Breaking the code of texts**:
  - How do I crack the code of this text?
  - How does the code work?
  - Is there more than one semiotic system operating here? If so, how do they relate?
  - What are their codes & conventions?
  - How do the parts relate singly & in combination?
- **Making literal & inferential meanings of texts**:
  - How are the ideas in this text sequenced? Do they connect with one another?
  - Is the text linear or nonlinear; interactive or non-interactive? How does this affect the way I make meaning?
  - What prior knowledge & experiences might help me make meaning of this text?
  - How will my purpose for reading and the context in which I am reading influence my meaning making?
- **Using the texts in real-life situations:**
  - What is the purpose of this text, and what is my purpose in using it?
  - How have the uses of this text shaped its composition?
  - What should I do with this text in this context?
  - What are my options or alternatives after reading?
- **Critically analysing texts in order to understand why they have been constructed, who benefits from their construction, and who controls access to them:**
  - What kind of person, with what interests & values produced this text?
  - What are the origins of this text?
  - What is the text trying to make me believe & do?
  - What beliefs & positions are dominant in the text?
  - What beliefs & positions are silenced or absent?
  - What do I think about the way this text presents these ideas & what alternatives are there?
  - Having critically examined this text, what action and I going to take?

In addition to the four resources, of increasing importance are the multiple modes for designing texts: linguistic designs (delivery, vocabulary, metaphor, modality, transivity, and information structure), visual design (images, page layouts, screen formats), audio design (music and sound effects), gestural design (body language, both in person and in image), spatial design (the meaning of environmental spaces, architectural spaces) and their interrelations (The New London Group, 2000). No longer are linguistic designs of print based texts of singular importance.

Catherine Fullerton, Principal of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, used the multiple designs for learning framework to identify the complex and diverse forms of sense-making that Show people deploy within

their learning and living communities (Fullerton et al, 2004). In an article in an earlier edition of *Education in Rural Australia* Fullerton (2004) highlighted the multiple ways Show people understand and engage with the world. She observed their rich oral culture (p. 76), their ability to 'spruik', negotiate equipment purchases and skill in running their own business (p. 77) and her students' exposure to these informal literacies. Moreover, she valued these literacies as a sound foundation for the development of system sanctioned literacy skills. Her work was important for the way it highlighted the diverse repertoires of literacy practices for a particular community and her effective literacy building practices for this small itinerant multi-aged class. Such outcomes highlight her professionalism as a teacher in recognising the diverse skills of her students and in planning a curriculum that was centred on encouragement and relevance to the community as well as leading students to system sanctioned literacies.

Another Education Queensland framework guiding teachers' work is *The Productive Pedagogies* (Education Queensland, 2006); a way for thinking about (theorising), enacting (operationalising) and assessing pedagogical practice that was developed from *The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (Education Queensland, 2001). *The Productive Pedagogies* built on several decades of work in school reform and educational sociology in North America and elsewhere and ensured a tightly woven focus on academic outcomes and social outcomes, and the importance of teaching and teachers, in particular of quality teaching (Green & Reid, 2004, p. 264-265). *The Productive Pedagogies* framework has four core elements, each of which are elaborated upon by a range of sub-elements:

- **Intellectual quality** – encompasses higher-order thinking, deep knowledge, deep understanding, substantive conversation, knowledge as problematic, and metalanguage;
- **Connectedness** – encompasses student direction, social support, academic engagement, explicit quality performance criteria, and self-regulation;
- **A supportive classroom environment** – encompasses cultural knowledge, inclusivity, narrative, group identity, and active citizenship; and
- **Recognition of difference** – encompasses knowledge integration, background knowledge, connectedness to the world, and problem-based curriculum.

Thus the task besetting the Wowan State Primary School teachers was how to enact these complimentary frameworks in a meaningful and productive way for their students. The MCEETYA Taskforce into Rural and Remote Education, Training, Employment and Children's Services (MCEETYA, 2001) provided case studies that showed that curriculum best meets the needs of rural and remote students when (1) programs are developed in partnership with the local community; and (2) educational programs and curriculum are aligned to the requirements of the National Goals of Schooling and are appropriately applied to the local context. The following section reports on how the teachers

approached these challenges and the outcomes that resulted in them being awarded a National Literacy & Numeracy Week Celebration Grant in 2006.

COMMUNITY INTERESTS: THE THEATRE, PRODUCTIVE PEDAGOGIES & LITERACY OUTCOMES

The Wowan community already had a burgeoning interest in the theatre, spurred on by a previous principal who worked with the town's adult thespians to stage three plays. It is not uncommon for rural schools and their personnel to play a vital role in community cultural development (McKinnon, Kearns & Crockett, 2004). Capitalising on this interest, the 2006 Principal, Pam Liddel, floated the idea of the Wowan State Primary School Theatre Restaurant 2006. A former pupil who now attends secondary school in another town took charge of the stage lighting with resources on loan from Mount Morgan State High School. Rachel recalls performing in school concerts as a child, but maintains the current Theatre Restaurant Project is substantially different.

> **Rachel:** *We never had anything like this. We had concerts where there were nibbles and items that were organised for us. We just turned up on the night and did a performance.*

While such events are always destined to provide a bit of light relief from the hard labour of cattle and crop farming and give a geographically distant community a central focus, they must also serve to build students' academic and social outcomes. In the name of good education, such outcomes must be the centre of all projects. Pam, Coralyn, Rachel, and their teaching colleagues, Amanda Johansen and Liz Kane, and teacher-aides, Penny Busk and Karen Atwell, were adamant that the real learning would happen through the students taking charge of the project's content and administration, rather than the students just being the actors and performers of someone else's production.

Each multi-age class set about selecting their item for the performance. All efforts were focused on student selection which ensured a fit with the 'connectedness', 'supportive classroom environment' and 'recognition of difference' productive pedagogies. In doing so, students were breaking the code of texts under consideration, and actively making literal and inferential meaning of texts as they considered how they would or would not use the text in a public performance. Once texts were selected, the students from each class were able to assert their mark, modifying the content and character roles of 'There Once was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly' (Pre-school/Prep/Year One), 'The Porcupine' (Years Two/Three/Four), 'Ali Barber and the Forty Bikies' (Years Five/Six/Seven) and a range of other small group items nominated and designed by the students themselves.

> **Rachel:** *I was more involved with the nurses in 'The Porcupine' item, so we were talking about 'What do nurses look like?' and 'How do they act?'. The students picked out the key thing, like what is the mother going to wear? The mother has to have a dress on and an apron, and all of those sorts of things. They picked out the*

key thing for their character. The Years Two/Three/Four didn't have enough characters [for every child to have a part], so we inserted more characters. The children said which role they wanted to take on, and if there weren't enough lines, the children wrote lines.

Coralyn: The writing, looking at the play, and they looked at what wasn't working and changed the text, to make sure it flowed better and they could see that it was bogged down and boring. They made it work. If you look at the Years Five/Six/Seven play it was horrible and Pam was horrified that they had chosen it. She said, 'How was I going to put this on?' It was what the children wanted and she went with it. The children organised the costumes themselves. They got tricycles from their younger siblings and one dad mended one of them.

If the students had been restricted to merely performing the text verbatim, they would not have had become text producers. Affording them the opportunity to also produce text involved them as text designers, in particular, as linguistic designers (selecting vocabulary, modality, transivity and information structure), audio designers (music and sound effects), gestural designers (body language) and spatial designers (using the space on stage).

The Years Five/Six/Seven were also responsible for the administrative work of the Theatre Restaurant and as such designed the theatre tickets, advertising posters, and programs. They had a vested interest in ensuring the Theatre Restaurant was a financial success as most of the proceeds were being redirected to defray the costs associated with an excursion to the nation's capital. In other words, these students had a real-life project for a real-life audience and a real-life purpose for ensuring its success. They were highly motivated, as Rachel attests.

Rachel: They wanted to do everything very professionally. So if anyone wanted to attend, they had to buy a ticket. The students made the tickets through the 'Publisher' program. We didn't make one type of ticket, all kids got to make tickets. Up until then our students had only used 'Microsoft Word'. It meant they were using technological literacies. Also, all different terms like 'admission' and all the terms that go with that text. They also made the menu for the night that went out and they wanted to do that in a brochure format. They designed that themselves. The menu was a collaborative thing and the P & C had some input into what food items would be universally acceptable to the adults in the audience and what food products were being donated. The students also produced the flyers to go into the newsletter and to advertise around town and in the local newspaper for the small communities around Wowan.

Significant within this range of tasks was the need for students to start to critically analyse texts in order to understand why they have been constructed, who benefits from their construction and who controls access to them. In other words, the students were living through the real-life application of text analyst work. These tasks also employed the students as visual designers where attention to image, page layout, colour and font were of paramount importance. Most notably, all students' efforts were published, thereby giving each student a reason to seek critique and refine the design of their product. There was no space for students to hide or allow others to do their work; all students were

engaged with the productive pedagogy of intellectual quality as they acquired deep knowledge and deep understanding about the tasks at hand. Day after day the students were involved in substantive conversations with each other and their teachers where they had to draw upon their developing metalanguage of performances and administrative facets to explain themselves. The teachers supported the students, but in the end success or failure would depend upon the students. They would have to gain and apply high-level skills, make critical judgments, interpret their effort to their supporters, work with each other and with adults, and produce performance and administrative outcomes. All of the teachers reported the students' high levels of engagement with the project over its one month duration. Comments from Rachel were typical of the elucidations from all the teachers:

> *Rachel: Where in general the more conventional forms of teaching don't seem to turn them on, motivate them, something totally different, out of the ordinary did. They were looking for resources in their own time. A lot of that came from home. And volunteering their lunch hours: 'Can we go up and rehearse?' It brought kids out of their shell who would never normally do that sort of thing. One student in particular, who never puts himself forward, and then after we went through the script he said, 'I want to be that guy'. He was the quietest most timid fellow and he just absolutely came out of his shell. For some of them to see that this isn't uncool, to see that people actually like this, to see that it was accepted, to behave that way, it encouraged them to do that sort of thing. I know some of the boys from the farm don't do that sort of thing, but once they saw the response from others, and that others were getting into it, it really broke down those barriers.*

From Rachel's account, it seems that the students' motivation to be engaged with literacy was increased when learning was contextualised within a project to which the students connected. In this project, all students had the opportunity to be self directed within a supportive classroom environment.

CONCLUSION

This recount of Wowan State Primary School's award winning Theatre Restaurant project contributes to the dearth of literature on the teaching of literacy in rural communities and serves to correct myths that rural teachers are not highly skilled and fail to connect to their community. This article gives an account of one group of teachers' high level of commitment to the profession in terms of their practice and professional development despite physical and administrative obstacles and being faced with job insecurity and underemployment. It shows how they expertly enacted two significant departmental frameworks for reforming pedagogy and engaging students with diverse and complex designs of literacy. This paper is also an attempt to fulfil one of the MCEETYA Taskforce into Rural and Remote Education, Training, Employment and Children's Services (MCEETYA, 2001, p. 116) recommendations that 'efforts should be directed to raising the profile of the profession by acknowledgement of the professional qualities of country teachers, leaders and support staff'. Thus this article publicly recognises exemplar practices from one small rural school deserving of national attention.

Core to this article has been the way that the Wowan State Primary School teachers attended to the interests of the students and the wider community and operationalised literacy and pedagogical reform theory. The Theatre Restaurant project is not meant to be a 'one-size-fits-all' program that should be naively taken up and forced upon any small rural school. After all, rural schools, and rural communities are not all the same (see for example, Reid, Edwards & Power, 2004).

Rural schools throughout Australia interested in applying for National Literacy & Numeracy Week 2007 awards should consult the national website www.**literacy**and**numeracy**.gov.au during term 1, 2007.

Acknowledgements:

Biography:
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