

Research on the Provision of Education in the New South Wales Central School*

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A survey of parents, teachers and students in three rural New South Wales central (K-10) schools examined the provision of education. The study identified that parents and teachers regarded small class sizes as an important educational benefit as it allowed for a personalized and individualized curriculum. Teacher turnover was found to be decreasing in the central schools. Students and parents wanted a broader range of curriculum offerings which included Agriculture, Art and Foreign languages. Actual student retention rates to Year 12 were low yet three-quarters of all students would like to go onto Year 12.

INTRODUCTION

The provision of educational opportunities for children in rural areas has recently received much discussion and some research in Western Europe, *e.g.*, O.E.C.D. report on Education in Sparsely Populated Areas Project, Education and Local Development Project, [3]; in the United States with the increase in specialist rural education journals like the Small Schools Forum, Research in Rural Education and the formation of state and regional organizations concerned with education in rural America; and, in Australia *e.g.*, Isolated Schools [10]; Commission of Inquiry Report on Poverty and Education [6]; Review of the Commonwealth Country Area Program [9]; Listening and Responding a Review of Education in Rural New South Wales [2]; and the Schooling in Rural Australia [1] project produced by the Commonwealth Schools Commission.

In New South Wales, parents, teachers and community groups in rural areas have become increasingly concerned about the nature and provision of a relevant education for their children. One form of education in rural New South Wales areas has been the central school. The central school grew out of the movement to consolidate a number of one-teacher schools in rural areas into a larger school. Turney, Sinclair and Cairns [10] claim that there were sound educational reasons involving improved facilities and staffing that led New South Wales and other Australian states to consolidate schools. A further advantage of this consolidation was the addition of a secondary education department and instructional program in the central school. Whether or not these sound educational reasons and improved facilities have been realized is currently a matter of increasing scrutiny and debate.

Setting the Scene

The central school in New South Wales is administered by the New South Wales Department of Education. The Department of Education provides a centrally organized and controlled model of educational provision. All government schools whether elementary, central or secondary have their staff, resources and curriculum guidelines provided from the head office located in Sydney.

The central school is located in rural areas of New South Wales. Further, the central school is found usually in rural townships with populations under 3,000. There are 62 central schools operating in New South Wales; 14 are located in the Riverina region in the southwest portion of New South Wales, 19 in the Western region of New South Wales and 20 in the Northwestern region of New South Wales. Consequently, the occurrence of central schools is usually higher in the more geographically remote and small sized townships on the Western side of the Great Dividing Mountain Range.

Data from recent demographic studies have identified that there has been an overall decline in the number of elementary school-aged children in New South Wales. This trend has resulted in small rural schools either becoming smaller, and hence more vulnerable to scrutiny in terms of economic and educational viability, or closure, often against local community wishes. As a consequence of this declining enrollment pattern the effects are now emerging at the secondary education level. In particular, the secondary departments of some central schools in New South Wales, where enrollment is less than 50 students, have experienced the same scrutiny as the rural elementary schools.

The central school normally offers an educational program for students from Kindergarten through the

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*Based on a report to the NSW Education Commission on The N.S.W. Central School, November 1985.

school certificate level in Year 10. Enrollment in the secondary department of the central schools ranges from 29 to 327 students. In addition, there are a number of central schools, 25 of the 62 central schools, that offer the complete K-12 educational program for rural students.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN CENTRAL SCHOOLS

The central school is in the position of developing and implementing one K-10 school policy in the various curriculum areas. In the central school, the potential for guiding the development of the student from a young child through to the commencement of their adult working life presents teachers with a very real educational challenge. The school executive can encourage and organize the teaching staff so that an effective interchange of ideas at the infants (K-2), elementary (3-6), and secondary (7-10) levels can be achieved that will assist in developing a sound instructional program for the students. There is the potential opportunity for staff to teach at different levels within the school and in the process develop a better understanding of where the students come from or go onto in their educational program. A consequence of this potential benefit is that both teachers and students get to know each other better. Another related benefit concerns the transition from infants to elementary and from elementary to secondary levels of schooling. This transition occurs more smoothly and with less emotional concern for both students and teachers than in the usual transfer from separate elementary schools to the local secondary school.

A further *potential* advantage of the central school relates to the educational program. With a flexible approach to staffing within the school, teachers with a particular curriculum expertise and interest can be used at various levels.

This advantage creates the situation for whole school K-10 curriculum planning, as well as allowing the teachers to monitor the implementation of the curriculum plan more closely. The outcome of this flexibility and curriculum development is a well organized and structured set of learning experiences for the children as they progress through the central school.

DESIGN OF STUDY

The study was designed first to investigate and describe the characteristics of the central school and the community it serves; and second, to identify issues and concerns where further, more detailed and specific research was needed. This study was designed to seek the perceptions of the schools' administrative executive, the teaching staff, the students and the parents of the students.

In this study, three central schools located in the Riverina Region of New South Wales were used. The first of these central schools, School A was located in a small rural town with a population of approximately 500. This central school had total secondary enrollment of 50 students and has been under close scrutiny by the

Riverina Regional Office for at least the last six years. School A is approximately 30 kms away from a large provincial city (population 50,000) with six large government and non-government high schools. Further, there is an existing school bus service that transports students to this city for their high school education. The second school in this study, School B, is located in a town with a population of 1,100. School B has an additional drawing area of approximately 1,000 persons and five (5) small one or two teacher rural schools from surrounding rural communities. School B is 40 kms from the same provincial city as school A. The present secondary department enrollment is 129 students and school B currently has a Master in charge of Secondary Studies on the school establishment. Neither school A nor school C have this executive appointment. Again, students at school B do have the choice of attending the local central school or catching the school bus into the high schools in the provincial city. The third school in this study, school C, is located in a small town with a population of approximately 750. This town is approximately 100 kms from the same provincial city as schools A and B and is at least 60 kms distant from any large township that would contain a high school. School C is located in a town in which there is a small mining operation which provides the major non-rural source for employment of people in the town. In each school, the secondary department offers subjects up to School Certificate or Year 10 level.

The design of the data collection component of this study included interviewing the central school principals, surveying all teaching staff at each school, administering a questionnaire to all students in Year 6, 8 and 10 at each school, and surveying the parents of the children enrolled in Years 6, 8 and 10 at each school. In each case the interview schedules, questionnaires and requests for factual, statistical data about each school were developed by the researcher.

FINDINGS

Survey of Teachers

Research on rural education usually has as one of its main focuses the issue of the teaching staff in rural schools [7]. A study by the Western Australian Department of Education [5] on teacher transfers focused on the high turnover rate of teachers in rural areas and made the following conclusions:

- i) a high turnover is disadvantageous to the student but is likely to continue;
- ii) the thing most likely to encourage a longer stay by teachers is financial incentives but even this is unlikely to have much of an impact;
- iii) handover procedures should be improved to minimize disruptions; and,
- iv) schools tend to be staffed by relatively inexperienced teachers who have an expectation of a short stay in the school.

The *Listening and Responding* review of education in rural New South Wales [2] noted that traditionally staff turnover was high in many rural communities. This review stated that in many rural areas of New South Wales a good deal of stability had been achieved by a reduction in teacher mobility.

Further, the Australia-wide review of the Commonwealth Country Areas Program [9] has also recorded that the high turnover of staff is a continuing concern and often interfered with the smooth operation of school initiatives sponsored by the Country Areas Program.

In the present study, forty-six (46) teachers representing all levels of education participated in the teacher survey. Twenty-five teachers were female. The average length of service at the central school at the time of the survey was 4.4 years with a range from 1 year (for 10 staff) to 16 years (for 1 staff). For thirteen (13) teachers, this was their first teaching service appointment. For the remaining teachers, their teaching experience ranged from 3 years to 37 years (average length of service 13.4 years).

When the teachers were asked to identify what level(s) they taught at the school, only seven teachers (15% of survey) reported teaching at more than one level. This finding suggests that more encouragement and assistance are required to maximize the utilization of existing staff expertise. Teachers were asked to express their reaction to being appointed to the central school. Forty-two (42) teachers (90%) were happy with their appointment and twenty-seven (27) teachers (58%) indicated that they wanted to stay at the school. This finding supports the observation made in the *Listening and Responding* review [2] that staff turnover was decreasing in rural schools.

On the question of advantages and disadvantages of the central school, the teachers expressed opinions that the perceived advantages of the central school organization included:

- i) a close student-teacher relationship (17 teachers);
- ii) the opportunity to personalize instruction to the needs of the child due to smaller class size (17 teachers); and,
- iii) the opportunity to be involved in K-10 curriculum development (10 teachers).

By contrast, the teachers believed that the disadvantages associated with central school included:

- i) the small range of elective subjects available for students in years 7-10 (16 teachers);
- ii) the lack of a secondary subject head of department from whom guidance and professional advice could be obtained (10 teachers);
- iii) the lack of resources, equipment and teaching rooms (10 teachers); and,
- iv) the requirement to teach outside their area of expertise and interest (6 teachers).

When the teachers were asked about parent-teacher relationships at the school, 81% of the teachers expressed the opinion that the quality of the relationship was good or very good. On the future of central schools, teachers

expressed the opinion that the central school has an important role to play in rural education as well as providing a more personal schooling experience for the students (14 teachers). Nine (9) teachers expressed the opinion that the central school should continue as it provided an important community focus.

The academic background of the school administrative or executive was one issue on which the majority of teachers agreed. Eighty-one percent (81%) stated that the school needed an executive structure which represented both the secondary and elementary departments. At present, all executive positions are filled by personnel whose teaching experiences have been in elementary schools. The teachers expressed the opinion that in all central schools, irrespective of size, the executive should consist of at least the school principal, and two deputy principals, one in charge of the secondary department and one in charge of the elementary department. *This is not* the present practice for staffing in all central schools. Teacher response to the question of whether the principal should have an elementary or secondary background, revealed that there was divided opinion:

- i) 34% believed the principal should have a secondary background;
- ii) 20% believed the principal should have an elementary background; and,
- iii) 28% believed either background was appropriate provided the school executive had both elementary and secondary representation.

The finding is supported by the *Listening and Responding* review [2] which suggested that the school executive should represent both elementary and secondary departments.

Survey of Students

Recent reports on rural education in Australia, for example, *Listening and Responding* [2] and the *Review of the Commonwealth Country Area Program* [9] have concentrated their attention on issues such as the school curriculum, post school education, staffing, technology, children with special needs, future directions and proposing recommendations. One important area that these reports have overlooked concerned the perceptions of the student population attending rural schools. By contrast, Turney et al. [10] in their report on isolated students in the western region of New South Wales did seek and document student reactions to their educational aspirations and expectations, to issues related to the school curriculum, to their attitude towards school, and to their motivation and achievement. An integral feature of this research study was concerned with seeking student reaction to a range of issues identified in the literature. The particular issues examined in the study were: student attitude towards school; the school curriculum; transition from elementary to secondary schooling; participation and retention in secondary education; and, travel time to and from the central school.

In this study students in Year 6, 8 and 10 were surveyed. The total number of students surveyed was 165. Eighty-five (51%) were male and eighty (49%) were female. Sixty-three (38%) were enrolled in Year 6 with ages ranging from 11 and 13 years, fifty-six (34%) were enrolled in Year 8 with ages ranging from 13 to 15 years, and forty-six (28%) were enrolled in Year 10, with ages ranging from 15 to 17 years.

On the questions related to travel to and from the central school, fifty-one (31%) reported that they walked to school and fourteen (8%) used bicycles. These students represented the group that lived in or very near to the towns in which the central schools were located. For the remaining one hundred students (61%), they reported traveling by bus or car to the school. The average traveling time to and from school each day for *all* the students in this survey was 20 minutes. For 31% of the students, their one way traveling time was 30 minutes or more each day.

A number of items on the student questionnaire sought their attitude towards school. Overall, 74% of the students reported that they liked school. The most common reasons advanced by the students were:

- i) they had developed good friendships at school (52 students); and,
- ii) they needed a good education for later life (57 students).

For the minority of students who disliked school, the main reasons advanced were:

- i) schooling involved too much work (7 students); and,
- ii) the subjects offered were not interesting (5 students).

When the students were asked specifically what they liked about their school, the following statements were made:

- i) 42 students reported that the small class sizes allowed for more individualized attention;
- ii) 47 students commented that the small school size meant that it was easier to make friends and to know everyone in the school; and,
- iii) 18 students reported that the teaching staff was good.

Student perception of what aspects of the school they would like to see changed centered on the following issues:

- i) the offering of a wider range of subjects in the secondary department (32 students);
- ii) improved sporting equipment and greater variety of sports (24 students); and,
- iii) the playground facilities (9 students).

The final component in this student attitudinal area concerned whether the student preferred to attend another school and why. One hundred and thirty-seven students (83%) reported that they did not want to attend another school while twenty-five (15%) reported that they would like to attend another school. The principal reason advanced by this minority group related to their concern about the small range of subjects available in the secondary

department (16 students) when compared with the subject offerings at a high school.

Students were asked to report on whether their parents had considered their changing schools at the end of year 6. Thirty-eight students (23%) reported that this option had been raised with the student, forty-eight (29%) reported they did not know and seventy-seven (46%) reported that this option was not discussed.

Student reaction to aspects of the school curriculum were sought. Students were asked to report on their perception of their progress at school. One hundred and forty-three (86%) believed that their progress was *'alright'* or *'good'*. Only nine students (5%) reported that their school work was not good while eleven students (6%) reported that their progress was very good.

Seventy-seven students (46%) stated that the school did not offer a wide range of subjects in Years 7-10. In particular, the students repeatedly identified the following subject areas as being omitted from the school curriculum in descending rank order of importance:

Agriculture
Art
Foreign Languages
Computer Studies
History

The final area of the student survey explored the issue of participation and retention of students into senior secondary education. Eighty-four students (51%) stated that they wanted to go on to Years 11 and 12 and sit for the externally administered Higher School Certificate examinations. This finding is almost identical to that reported by Pullen [8] based on a survey of students in northern New South Wales. Sixty-four students in this study realized that their desire would involve them in either daily traveling to and from a High School or going to a boarding school for Years 11 and 12, a variety of reasons were identified. The more frequently advanced reasons concerned:

- i) no interest (19 students);
- ii) lack of ability (12 students);
- iii) desire to go to work (27 students—although only 5 in this group reported the desire to go to work on the family farm); and,
- iv) not wanting to travel to and from the high school (5 students).

In the *Listening and Responding* review [2], the NSW Education Commission reported that the average retention rate in central schools was 24%. This figure is well below the reported average retention rate of 34% in New South Wales' schools. An important finding was identified when students were asked to respond to the proposition that if the central school went on to Years 11 and 12, what would be their preference. One hundred and sixteen (70%) indicated that they would stay on and sit for the Higher School Certificate examination. Their response to this proposition represented approximately a 20% increase in the stated preference to remain at school beyond the present central school educational program

which finishes at Year 10. This suggests that an examination of retention rates from Year 7 to 12 may provide an important starting point for a state-wide investigation of the educational aspiration, subject offerings, and schooling organization to promote increased student participation in a full high school education.

Survey of Parents

In any evaluation or investigation of school provision, parental opinion is rarely sought and where it is it tends to be at a cursory level. With increasing demands by parents and other community members for involvement in educational decision making this can no longer be the case.

This survey revealed decisively that parents *do* have opinions on a whole range of issues relating to the school their children attend and that, despite the fears of many teachers and administrators, they are not negative nor critical. Indeed the overwhelming response from the parent bodies of the three schools in the survey was that they were happy with the school and they felt that it was doing a good job with their children. This does not mean that they did not make criticisms and offer suggestions as to how the school could or should be improved.

Questionnaires were administered to parents of students in Years 6, 8 and 10. An analysis of the parent responses revealed that 94% of parents stated that their children were happy at the central school. Parents, at all schools, felt that the main task of the school was to provide a happy, stable learning environment where their children receive a 'good basic education'.

Parents saw the smaller class sizes, good parent-teacher relationships and the ability of the staff to give more individual and personal attention to the students as being some of the positive aspects of the school. They claimed that their children benefited from the 'family' atmosphere of the school where the students knew each other and staff knew all the students.

Interestingly, for a number of parents, the stability of staff was seen as an asset, while for some parents they commented that some staff stayed too long at the school and the principal particularly needed to be changed every 4 years. Also, a number of parents felt that the central school had a lot of young inexperienced teachers as members of the teaching staff. It would appear that from these comments the high turnover of staff said to be a feature of central schools, certainly in the 1970's, has decreased.

The most widespread criticism of the central school by parents (46%) was the range of subjects available in years 7-10. These parents felt that their children were disadvantaged by the limited range of subjects available. In particular, the following subject areas were repeatedly identified by the parents as omissions from the school curriculum:

Agriculture
Art
Foreign Languages

This finding is similar to the students' rank order of subjects that they would like to have available at the school. Given the rural location of the three Central Schools, it is somewhat surprising that agriculture is not an important part of the curriculum. Seventy-five percent of all parents reported that they wanted their child/children to go on to Years 11 and 12 and sit for the Higher School Certificate—36% of parents reported that this would cause financial hardship for the family. Given the current emphasis in the 'Participation and Equity Policy' [4] the retention rate from Year 10 into Years 11 and 12 in the case of students attending central schools is a matter for serious investigation. These statistics would suggest that central school students may well be at a considerable disadvantage in comparison to their peers in the Years 7-12 high schools. Many parents (75%) reported that school was an important community focal point and played an important role in this regard in the community. It was a setting that brought people together and helped bridge the 'generation gap'. One parent also commented that because it was a relatively small school, the school needed community involvement!

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- * Central Schools are happy places with positive student/teacher/parent relationships. This should be further fostered and encouraged.
- * The Central School is regarded as one important community focal point.
- * Smaller class sizes in Central Schools mean more individualized and personalized education.
- * The full potential for whole school (K-10/12) curriculum planning is not being realized.
- * Wherever possible staff should be deployed across the whole school range (*i.e.*, K-10/12) depending on their interest and expertise.
- * There needs to be an executive position in both the Elementary and Secondary sectors of the school.
- * Community and parental involvement should be developed even further as one of the real strengths of the Central School.
- * There is a need for a broadening of the curriculum offerings particularly in the areas of Agriculture, Art and Foreign Languages. Ways of broadening the curriculum need to be explored as a matter of urgency.
- * Traditionally, Central Schools have had a high teacher turnover. This has stabilized somewhat during the 1980's. However, with the current and impending teacher shortages, central and small rural high schools are likely to be the worst affected. The relative stability of the past few years is not likely to continue!
- * The question of retention rate demands immediate attention particularly if serious regard is to be paid to current initiatives in Participation and Equity. Students and parents have high aspirations for H.S.C. Seventy-five percent expressed the desire to continue onto the H.S.C., in reality few do, approximately twenty-five percent.

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