

‘If we don’t shout loudly, we might be forgotten’

Report from SiMERR ACT

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The population of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is about 320000, with the majority of people living in urban areas. It covers 2358 square kilometres, including the Jervis Bay territory. Because the ACT is regarded as having an urban population, its rural areas are often overlooked. These are located close to the NSW border in rural surroundings and have smaller schools catering for local children. Two such schools were chosen as part of the study. Both are located in Provincial Areas (MSGLC Category 2.2.1) and are distinctly different in size, community profile and other characteristics to metropolitan schools in the ACT.

ACACIA SCHOOL

Context

Acacia Primary is administered by the ACT Department of Education and Community Services (DECS) and has a current enrolment of approximately 63 students. The school is in a Provincial Area (MSGLC category 2.2.1).

In addition to the full-time principal, there are three full-time teachers (K-2, 3-4 and 5-6), a full-time Preschool Director and several casual and part-time staff. Ten teachers were interviewed, along with the Principal. Two separate focus groups were conducted with eight parents and five students.

The school has an Indigenous student population of about 60%, mostly from the local community. Many of the remaining students come from small surrounding communities within 15 minutes drive.

Teacher Interviews

The principal (who has previously worked in remote schools elsewhere in Australia) identifies quite serious problems associated with the school, particularly in relation to the Indigenous student population. While some are highly motivated and well supported from home, many are not. His first task, upon taking over the job, was to work to ensure that students actually ‘stayed in their classrooms’ during the school day. He identified significant

occurrences of split families, with students being raised by grandparents, and evidence of quite serious social and behavioural disadvantage.

Overall, the school is very well-resourced (although the computers were noted to be old and due for replacement). The staff are working to rebuild a sense of pride in the school and a sense of academic worth which has been lacking in recent years.

There are particular issues associated with being part of a system from which the school is geographically isolated. In fact, it is one of two schools in this system which is isolated, all others being quite closely located. This tends to lead to a feeling of neglect by administration and curriculum authorities – the principal noting that they really ‘do not quite know what to do with us’.

Recent attempts had been made to initiate relationships with surrounding NSW schools and to take advantage of this support network. The school has also adopted much of the NSW curriculum, since the ACT School-based curriculum does not work well when there are so very few teachers with so little support.

Teachers also noted the problems associated with the pay differential between ACT and NSW systems, especially with regard to attracting casual teachers, who are ‘\$50 a day worse off’ at Acacia Primary than in local NSW schools.

Reasons for teaching in a rural/regional school

Nearly all teachers lived within 15-20 minutes drive from the school (the furthest coming from 50 kilometres away). Half were long-term residents of the area, the others having come from outside (including the USA, but mostly from Canberra or other cities). The majority indicated an intention to stay in the area. About half came with a wide experience of other schools and other systems; the other half were teachers in their first two-three years of teaching. All chose to teach at this school because of its location, either in relation to their own home, or the beauty and advantages associated with this region.

There were deliberate attempts to build a sense of community both within the school and with the local communities. One teacher noted that ‘I was asked to come by the principal because of my connection to the local community?’ Another ‘started off as a parent helper’ (and is now a teacher assistant), and one ‘chose this school to teach because my children attend, and I have an affinity with the community’.

Strengths of the school in helping students achieve their potential in science, ICT and mathematics

All teachers referred to the ‘small class sizes’ and most to the excellent quality of the resources available. Small classes allowed them to adopt ‘one-to-one strategies’, and to ‘assist those with learning difficulties’.

Particular note was made of excellent resources for science, mathematics and ICT (‘smartboards are an excellent resource’) and the NSW *Count Me In Too* early numeracy program. The adoption of NSW Curriculum documents was noted as a positive move by one, and small grouping and individualised approaches to both academic work and behaviour were positively received.

The local resources and facilities were highly valued, as were the Indigenous community resources associated with the local National Park.

It's important to present a realistic picture of Indigenous issues and remote communities to student teachers – local knowledge is a great advantage, and encourage new blood for fresh ideas. (Teaching assistant)

Obstacles to helping students achieve their potential in science, ICT and mathematics

Student behavioural issues were highlighted as obstacles by several teachers. Behaviour was seen to be associated with problems of engagement and the need for appropriate resources and activities. Poor leadership in the past provided 'no sense of future directions and no-one willing to take responsibility for this', and behaviour management was generally poor. It was noted that the very small size of the school underpinned its failure to offer suitable older role models for appropriate behaviour and academic success. Social interaction was also seen as limited by the size of the school. One teacher remarked 'that a lot of people feel that their child misses out on social well-being when it comes to small schools'.

The transient nature of a substantial proportion of the population (short-term Government personnel) meant that children came and went, thus making ongoing success difficult.

Staff knowledge and expertise was noted in a negative light, especially with regard to science and mathematics, including a failure to adequately utilise local resource opportunities in this regard. While the school resourcing had previously been referred to positively, in this context it was noted that appropriate resources and teacher knowledge and skills in effective use of resources had proved less than desirable.

Views on attraction/retention of good science, ICT and mathematics

The need for balance between local teachers who know and relate to the community and its resources, and 'new blood with new ideas' was noted. Most teachers referred to the pay differential between the ACT system and the surrounding NSW system as a prime problem in attracting and retaining good teachers. The teachers generally appeared to demonstrate pride in their school, regardless of whether they were permanent or casual.

It was noted that the school needed to advertise 'the fact that we live in such a beautiful area. I don't think it would be hard to attract teachers here.'

Teachers' main recommendation

Not surprisingly, the main recommendation from teachers at Acacia concerned teacher support; the need to be experienced and able to access regular professional development opportunities. Essentially, there needs to be a sense of collegial membership of a professional community which attends to the varied needs – academic, social, behavioural and professional. Although this particular school is only 30 minutes from a large regional centre, in some ways it is as isolated as remote outback communities, since the administrative and educational support centre is geographically remote, and the school is only able to access such support with difficulty.

Parent Interviews

Several of the parents interviewed had children at the attached pre-school as well as the primary school.

Reasons for living in a rural/regional area and choosing this school

Only one parent (Indigenous) indicated that she was born in the area; all others had been in the area from 12 months to 25 years, with most indicating that they intended to stay due to the lifestyle and opportunities.

Most indicated that they had selected this school instead of other local schools because of its positive reputation and good resources (as an ACT school it was perceived as being better resourced than surrounding NSW schools). It was also perceived as being supportive and positive in the treatment of children.

Educational aspirations for their children

All parents indicated that they wanted the option of tertiary study for their children and most indicated that they expected that their children would take up this option.

Strengths of this school in helping children achieve their potential in science, ICT and mathematics

Small class sizes and dedicated teaching staff were commonly identified as contributing to successful outcomes in science, ICT and mathematics for this school. Also its proximity to the National Park was featured as a strength, making it easy to offer field trips.

Obstacles to improving children's outcomes in science, ICT and mathematics

Various obstacles were identified; including a 'lack of specialist qualifications or training in science/maths' and 'the disinclination [of teachers] to approach these disciplines'. 'Teachers' commitment to teaching and the school's behaviour policy (at the time)' were also suggested as obstacles.

Community characteristics, such as the 'small population', transience of students and parents', 'socio economic factors' and isolation from other schools were seen as further hindrances to improved academic outcomes.

Parents' main recommendation

The main recommendations of the parent group related to 'the strict promotion of these subjects (science, mathematics, ICT)'.

Recommendations also related to attraction and retention of teachers, including 'greater rewards (e.g., salary) for teachers calculated in terms of: responsibility, qualifications and willingness to go to hard-to-staff schools'.

A final interesting comment related to a perceived need to 'urbanise' the students. Some parents believed that 'as the students will inevitably need to go to regional or urban Australia', there was a need to familiarise them with travel to the 'big smoke' whenever possible.

This was related to the need for varied school experiences, particularly as parents saw their children and the community as changing and dynamic. While students need geographically appropriate schooling, they are not all being educated to stay in the region, and so need a range of experiences, not only in the community but in the wider geographical area.

Student Interviews

Advantages and disadvantages of living in a rural and regional area

All students lived in the local area, with the majority travelling only five minutes to school. The students cited it an advantage to live in the area because of the proximity to beaches. One stated that it is ‘a beautiful place and it has got heaps of things you can do’, while another found it boring. Most commented on the scenery, the wildlife and the National Park.

Most of the students intended to remain in the area. One knew he would move on because of his father’s work. One boy would like to go to the city and another to Newbridge, a larger suburb nearby.

Aspirations for education and careers

At this stage in their lives the students had embryonic ideas about future careers. One girl wanted to become a lawyer or professional sportsperson as well as being involved in the nearby National Park, ‘to make sure that no-one will interrupt our park’. Another girl wanted to be a zookeeper and another an Egyptologist, ‘because you get to travel to Egypt and I like mummies and I like to write about history’. One boy aspired to become a computer expert, while another wished to do his Dad’s job, ‘working with machines and computers and get paid \$50 a day [in the National Park]’.

Reflections on mathematics, science and ICT experiences

Several students found mathematics complicated, but half of the group enjoyed it. The students’ responses to science ranged from enjoyment to loathing. One girl stated that she liked science ‘because I find it very interesting, but we don’t often do science at school because we don’t get time’. Enjoyable aspects included group work and the students spoke of a project of making tin foil figures and floating them in water with weights on and competing against the teachers. Generally students did not see themselves engaging in science at home. Nor did they perceive a link between everyday activities in the home and projects at school.

The students used computers for Internet research and all except one had a computer at home. All loved the computers – ‘They’re the best.’ One boy claimed there was little use of the computer at school and it was used for writing and Internet research. He liked computers because he knew ‘a heap of stuff about it’.

BANKSIA PRIMARY SCHOOL

Context

Banksia Primary is located in a small village to the south of Canberra in one of the oldest settlements in the ACT. The school has consistently maintained an enrolment of approximately 30 students. The village consists of a general store, school, craft centre and church. Banksia Primary is in a Provincial Area (MSGLC Category 2.2.1).

The Primary School has a full-time principal, two full-time mainstream teachers, one part-time learning assistant and a Special Teacher’s Assistant (STA) three days per week. All staff including the principal participated in the interviews.

The school has 27 students in two composite classrooms. Currently there are 18 in Years K-2 and nine in Years 3-6. Half of the students come from the immediate area. Some students

who could come to Banksia instead go to private schools by bus. The pre-school operates two full days per week and is integrated into the primary school. It shares an open plan classroom with the K-2 class. The pre-school teacher was interviewed with the staff and this added another perspective to staff comments.

Teacher Interviews

Reasons for teaching at Banksia Primary

Only two of the staff lived in the local community. The principal lived in Canberra and it was her first year at the school. The previous principal lived locally and moved schools because he ‘needed a professional challenge’. The part-time learning assistant moved to the community and she started as a casual teacher, worked on contract, and then became permanent. The pre-school teacher came as a forced transfer. She was initially reluctant but now doesn’t want to leave. She drives 25km each day to the school. The staff generally indicated a wish to stay at the school.

The teachers saw many benefits in the lifestyle and the opportunities for ‘community type’ persons to build relationships. ‘It opens up a range of things socially and professionally’ and provides a chance to build ‘confidence as a teacher because of the smaller numbers’. In a professional sense, staff ‘get to know the whole child, become less judgemental and more accepting, which makes classroom management easier’.

Strengths of the school in helping students achieve their potential in science, ICT and mathematics

Many of the children worked in small groups, and this supported them in the three discipline areas. The staff saw the benefits of having students in their class for three years as an opportunity to ‘stretch, rather than cram’. They are able to make the focus different each year.

The school was well resourced for its size. The staff considered that the resources it had were comparable to bigger schools and that access to resources was good. The teachers saw the school as having a range of resources and emphasised the particular benefits for the students of the local natural resources. The school had just upgraded to broadband. As part of a move to enhance infrastructure the DECS will be providing more computers. The school had no space for a computer laboratory. The staff had mixed feelings about this. The learning assistance teacher who organised the library saw this as a benefit as ‘they can be embedded in the classroom’.

The school had the advantage of being part of a cluster which led to opportunities to undertake professional development within the cluster. The principal stated that ‘The cluster initiatives we are part of have enhanced [student] outcomes.’ The staff had established a professional learning community characterised by informal discussions. Their professional development budget was larger per teacher than that of most other schools and they had used the time to look at other schools as well as do appropriate courses. The principal was seen as encouraging teachers ‘to go and look at other schools, and we are encouraged that people come and look at our school’.

The professional development initiative was also seen as a way of attracting teachers and publicising the school which, despite its proximity to Canberra, was nevertheless seen as being ‘rural’:

Attracting [teachers] can be an issue, and I think it is a false perception that it is a long way away and that it is not really a typical school and we get told “what do you do out there anyway?” (Principal)

There were many examples of successful initiatives cited by the teachers. The school uses *Count Me in Too* which is part of a system-wide initiative. The school is part of a very active cluster with a number of projects underway and the teachers felt that there is a lot of support if they need to talk. The cluster is also part of a multiliteracies project. They have shared grants with other schools from the cluster – for example on boys’ education. Other activities included Peacemaker Day which was collaboratively planned (every student in every school in the cluster participated in activities) and transition activities which ‘were very good for our students’.

Being part of the cluster has enabled the grouping of teachers into professional learning communities around *Count Me in Too*, multiliteracies and cooperative reading. Teachers have been part of groups which met and discussed issues. The principal commented that ‘the leadership network throughout the school is excellent’. Occasionally the cluster is part of a collaborative grant application process.

Obstacles to helping students achieve their potential in science, ICT and mathematics

The staff agreed that student drift was a ‘big problem’. In contrast, there were twice as many applications for pre-school places as places available. ‘I don’t have trouble in the preschool – parents don’t seem to mind a rural start in education,’ but historically it has been a tradition to send students to Catholic or Christian schools. It is a strong Catholic rural community. The pattern is to send students to Banksia for pre-school and perhaps one or two years of primary school, and then place them in Catholic systemic schools. As an illustration of this:

Pre-schoolers are going to seven different schools next year from a group of 15. Five of them are going on to Banksia – which is good compared to previous years of two or three.

The trend of small rural schools being incubators for larger schools was noted by teachers.

Occasionally parents take children out in Grade 5 or 6 to give them the experience of a larger school. For high school they really disperse, many go to private schools, and Deakin is also popular due to a trend that started a few years ago, based on friendship patterns. (Teacher)

The tendency for students to go to bigger schools to get ready for high school depends on the number of students in the senior part of the school. ‘If there is a large cohort in the senior grade this happens less.’

Staff felt that it was easy to overlook science when learning areas were integrated. In the ACT schools can decide on the curriculum organisation and, as science is integrated with other subject areas, staff were of the opinion that it did not get enough emphasis. Staff perceived this as a common feature of primary schools where school-based curriculum is the general practice. They saw it as a subject that is ‘easy to do superficially, but harder to set up the inquiry model’. They saw that science is easier than mathematics to integrate ‘because it is based on real life’ but also agreed that ‘it is easier to miss, too’ since there are ‘fewer people to cover everything and not as much strength in every single area’.

The difficulty of keeping abreast of the rapid changes in ICT was emphasised by staff. One related issue is the question of how staff members who are not comfortable with ICT can be supported, and the pressure that is put on a member of staff who is very competent in this area to try to support other staff. This member of staff found it difficult that there is not a centralised computer laboratory facility, as she spends time ‘running between two classrooms’.

Another difficulty is obtaining relief teachers when required. Because of ‘the paddocks and the river, people see us as remote’. They are only five minutes further on than the nearest school but ‘relief teachers don’t come’. The teachers see that there is a ‘barrier in people’s perceptions’.

The teachers felt that another factor which can affect student progress is parental aspirations. Some parents say that students don’t need academic progress because they are just going to work on farms. Others just send them to school to have fun. Twenty percent of the children in the school are from farms. The principal felt that the teachers were ‘trying to promote change in a culture that doesn’t want it’.

The pre-school teacher was concerned about the lack of ICT support staff. She observed that there is one person for the ACT who has the job of providing support for 70-80 pre-schools.

Views on attraction and retention of good science, ICT and mathematics teachers

It was generally agreed that attracting staff was a difficulty and that the problem was due to the perceptions that people had about distance and isolation. The reality of the situation is seen as being different from the general perceptions. The release teacher believes:

It works well with what they do at Banksia, because if someone called me to do the lunch release for two hours, I wouldn’t do it, but you can stay a full day because they work it with the other teachers’ release and I get a full day. Other schools in the system do not do that.’

Some schools offer two hour blocks of work because that is what most schools are doing.

The staff felt that the ACT education system did not promote their school. They saw a need to ‘promote the school in the wider community so that they have a better understanding of what Banksia offers.’ They also saw the need to promote the school ‘to our system (DECS) as a very viable option to families and staff’.

The pre-school teacher spoke about how her own perceptions had changed since arriving at Banksia: ‘I guess when I think about it I didn’t want to come because I thought I’d be very isolated, but it’s a lot better than other preschools.’

Main recommendations

One of the recommendations from the staff was based on their experiences with a workshop which emphasised group dynamics:

Something that was wonderful, that we did at the beginning of last year; [was] learning how to work as a small group and how to communicate well. At a smaller school if one person is not getting on and working it can be a disaster. New teachers can’t always walk in and know how to handle the social situation.

More professional development support in this area would be regarded favourably and would help all staff to work together more productively.

The staff also suggested the need for a focus on science, ‘like we had before in maths and ICT, and that has succeeded’.

Teachers emphasised the need for personnel support for teachers, ‘rather more equipment’, for mathematics and science. The exception was ICT where they felt ‘you need more equipment’.

Parent Interviews

Several of the parents interviewed had children at the attached pre-school as well as at the primary school.

Reasons for living in a rural/regional area and choosing this school

Only one parent indicated that her family had recently moved to the area, for lifestyle reasons. Another had moved to the area when she married a farmer and had lived there for 15 years, and hoped to continue living there. The other parent, a father to two children at the school, had moved from Sydney 13 years earlier.

Two parents indicated that they had selected the school because of its proximity and because it was the *local* school. One parent added that he knew the school well as a community member and liked it. A third parent had moved her son to Banksia because he was:

Unhappy at his old school – it was too large. Here it’s a nice community and he is able to make friends. It is flexible, offering more opportunity in areas that are of interest.

All parents commented on the environment and the safety factor in the school and the connectedness to the local community: ‘I think it is a wonderful environment. We are very, very fortunate that it gives the kids a good grounding.’

Strengths of rural/regional schools in helping children achieve their potential in science, ICT and mathematics

Parents mentioned a number of strengths in relation to the school, in particular, its flexibility, the multi-age classes and the opportunities for children to be extended. For example, one commented that the multi-age class ‘allows him to be extended, and he is good at maths and IT and can work above his grade level. At a bigger school he may not get the same attention.’

The third parent remarked that the resources for ICT and the teaching of ICT were not adequate and that the children were not ICT literate due to lack of expertise in the school. On the other hand it was stated that the school provided a good environment for teaching mathematics, as students could put many concepts into practice.

Obstacles to improving children’s outcomes in science, ICT and mathematics education

Parents identified a number of obstacles, including the need for teachers to become more ICT literate. Parents perceived that teachers needed to be more qualified – ‘More able to implement especially the IT stuff, because it moves so rapidly.’

Other concerns were raised about the standard of science teaching and that change was needed to ensure science was given greater emphasis. All parents thought that science was not taught as a separate subject, but integrated and related to matters in the environment. For example, the impression gained by one parent was that ‘When they are doing science they don’t necessarily refer to it as science to the children – they say projects, etc.’

Parents were, however, supportive of efforts to integrate classes, levels and subjects, all of which contributed to a positive and supportive teaching environment:

Integration works with pulling it all together. They’ve got a wonderful rapport in the class. Older kids helping the younger kids, a supportive environment – helping each other.

Parents’ recommendation

The main recommendations of this group related to increased professional development to improve teachers’ skills and in particular, their confidence.

A lot of teachers lack confidence in certain areas. I think teacher training has a lot of emphasis on the skills, and stresses teachers out and affects their confidence. Professional development needs to focus on the confidence as well – big thing to work on.

Another parent commented that she would like to see more emphasis on the teaching of maths, science and ICT, and more resourcing in the form of computer hardware.

Student Interviews

The majority of students lived outside the village and travelled from nearby ACT suburbs. Six students aged between six and nine were interviewed: two girls and four boys.

Advantages, disadvantages of living in rural and regional areas

Only one student lived in the town with the other five living in nearby suburbs; only one student walked to school but the others travelled by bus for 5-10 minutes.

All students would like to live in the area because of the quiet and natural beauty. Those living in nearby suburbs would have preferred to live in the area and contrasted the lack of pollution in the school environment with their place of living. One student had moved from an ACT suburban school because of the difficulties of a larger school and now had many friends.

Own aspirations for education and careers

Career aspirations for students included animal-related activities such as two wishing to be horse riding teachers, one a vet and another a ranger. One wanted to be a paleontologist, because ‘they study the life, they dig up bones and stuff and because they usually go around the world’. One boy wanted to be an artist because he enjoyed drawing and painting with his mother.

Reflections on Mathematics (positive and negative)

The younger students enjoyed ‘pluses’, ‘minuses’, ‘challenges’ and ‘times tables’. One student liked doing fractions – ‘They’re pretty easy.’ Assistance with mathematics is given by friends, the teacher or parents while some students use a calculator when in difficulty. Several

relied on older students sitting near them. One girl claimed to just work it out independently and gave an example of working out the nine times table.

Reflections on Science

The younger students claimed not to do any science in school but rather did it for homework. When prompted they spoke of projects such as planting things at home, water waste and measuring the rain gauge.

Don't do science, not really. I drink water and look at the gauge. (Peter, student)

I only do things liking waste and saving water. Always wait till the dishwasher is full before turning it on, so that you don't waste water. (Susan, student)

Reflections on using computers at school

All students enjoyed working with computers. These activities appeared to centre on games. According to the students the computers were used as a reward after set work was completed, and all were very keen to use the Internet. One recalled using computers for art activities with photos and one spoke of doing spelling activities. Students were aware of special games and one engaged with virtual pet fish.

I like to use the computer. If the teacher says we're allowed on the computer, everyone rushes for it. (Sally, student)

There was a shortage of computers in the Grade 3-6 room with two computers for 18 students while the other class of nine students had five computers. It appeared that while computers were available there was little integrated use of such within the curriculum and no specialised assistance with technology.

Summary

Banksia Primary was perceived by parents, teachers and students to have a lot of advantages in offering a sound education for students. This was partly because of its small size, where teachers could get to know the whole child, and where there were few problems with classroom management. The preschool was well integrated into the primary school and seen as advantageous in offering a quiet rural environment for the early years of schooling. Many Catholic families in the area were happy to start preschool and maybe even K-2 in a rural school but then moved children out in Grade 5 or 6 to give them the experience of a large school. The problem of student drift in the later years was seen as an issue to be addressed. Barriers to achievement in mathematics, science and ICT centred on a number of areas:

1. The need for a stronger focus on science, as opposed to the current integrated approach which does not have a strong focus on teaching scientific concepts and processes.
2. The curriculum was seen to be in need of reconsideration, integration and planning, and to indicate how to integrate mathematics, science and ICT into the curriculum.
3. In-servicing and professional learning opportunities for teachers in the school were considered to be essential as many teachers, although generalists, lacked confidence in teaching many different subject areas.
4. Resources, in the form of better ICT equipment and an improvement in the computer-student ratio, were considered essential.

5. Attracting teachers to the school was considered to be a problem, largely because of the size of the school, and the perception that it was different, and not a 'typical' school. The school also found it difficult to get relief teachers because of its distance from the metropolitan area.
6. Teachers and parents believe that the small size of the school, while providing a safe and caring environment, was detrimental in at least one respect, i.e. lacking a voice that would be heard in the ACT Department. As one teacher said: 'If we don't shout loudly we might be forgotten.'