CELEBRATING RURAL EDUCATION.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Contents

SPERA History

Spera: Missions and Goals

Opening Address - Sheila King

Past Conference Proceedings

Abstracts of Presentations at the 13th Conference

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Celebrating Connectedness
  Robin Maslen

Successes of a Rural University
  Jim Harvey

Health and Safety for Young People in Rural Areas
  Stephen Parka

Self-Esteem in Rural Schools: Dreams and Aspirations
  Diedra J. Young

The Effect of School Resources on Student Achievement: A Comparison of Rural and Urban Schools in Australia
  Beverley J. Webster and Diedra J. Young

Rural and Remote Placement as a Part of a Major in Children Studies
  Stephanie Jackiewicz, Kristen Brockman and Rosa Lincoln

First year University in Retrospect: The Voices of Rural Students
  Brian Hemmings, Doug Hill and David Ray

Rural Students Continuing their Studies in University Contexts
  Brian Hemmings, Russell Ray and Doug Hill

Royal Zoological Society of South Australia - Yellow-footed Rock-wallaby (Andu) Reintroduction Project
  Colin Murdoch and Katie Beddlin

Delivering the Arts Curriculum in isolated settings
  Ray Marino
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partnerships: Technology and Teaching: Celebrating the Link Between Universities and Rural Communities</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Ian W. Gibson and Sheila King</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidental Education (for women) in Rural Communities</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talmi Croshy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrating Distance Teaching Innovations: The Certificate in Distance Teaching</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin Boylan and Juhani Tuovinen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Networks in the Community</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Gardner, Sue Fairley and Henry Condon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An International Picture Postcard of Rural Communities</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila King</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification of the Barriers that Confront Rural Students upon Entering the University System and the Strategies Devised and Implemented</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Roe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emotional Transition of Twelve Year Olds from Home to a Boarding School</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrina Mason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Focus on Rural Australia for Students at the University of Ballarat</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Keith Moore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum: Student Reflection on Successful Rural Education</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie-Ann Mickan and Neranie Rowan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winner of the 1997 Australian Rural Education Award - Ag-Ed (Agricultural Education), accepted by Lyn of Toowoomba, Queensland.</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A picture postcard perspective of rural communities

by

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President of SPERA

Recently I had the opportunity to spend some time in rural communities in Canada, America and Britain. The intention of the workshop is to share snippets of these experiences of rural schools, rural communities and rural educators. The session will introduce participants to schools, regional institutions and community education opportunities in various rural and isolated settings. There will be opportunity to compare, contrast and celebrate.

I commenced my trip in British Columbia, Canada where I spent some time at the University of Victoria working with people involved in teacher education programs for preservice teachers. It was a great opportunity to compare and contrast the practicum programs available to the students, including an internship program.

I visited a number of local schools participating in the practicum programs offered by University of Victoria and met with students, teachers and supervisors. I spent considerable time at Bayside Middle School which is a new school catering for year 7,8 and 9 students. The transition from year 7 through to 9 involves home classes as well as specialist sessions utilising laboratories and workshops.

Bayside Middle school works closely with Lauwelnew tribal school where the school is staffed by tribal teachers and lessons are conducted in the native language. When students are ready to integrate in the public system they move on to Bayside, but return to Lauwelnew for appropriate periods of time if necessary.

I also visited Malaspino University College at Naneimo a regional university with an obvious rural perspective. Education students are encouraged to complete practicum in rural settings and course requirements are geared to suit these needs. The University College is currently developing a unit which has relevance to all faculties who provide workers for rural communities. The unit will focus on various rural issues and how to address them as a professional in the community. It will have relevance for health workers, doctors, teachers, childcare providers, police, lawyers etc.

From British Columbia I flew to Alberta and worked for a number of days at the University of Lethbridge. I was interested in the undergraduate teachers course of four years with an option for an additional period as an internship. Local schools volunteer to participate in the internship program and they negotiate the preferred program with the student and the
university. One student with an expertise in computing negotiated a one third teaching load, a one third inservice load where he trained the school staff and the other third was used as technology support across the whole school, including administration.

I also visited a number of schools including K-12 schools such as Noble Central where the primary school is in multigrades and the Principal and Deputy Principal have a 60% teaching load. Another school was the purpose built Jenny Emory Elementary school catering for K-7. This school had various centres which were utilised by the majority of students and staff.

I then caught a bus and headed south across the border to Montana, travelling across great open plains in a major grain growing area. I arrived in the capital, Helena, in time to attend a teachers conference. Montana state closes all the schools for two days to allow teachers to attend in-service and so there were 4,000 teachers at the conference! This was certainly Professional development on a grand scale. Various professional associations combine to provide a large and varied program which kept all participants occupied over the two and a half days. Many teachers were completing sessions for registration renewal which is a requirement for teachers in Montana.

I visited Montana State University at Bozeman and had the opportunity to work with final year students preparing for their final practicum. These students had opted to complete an international practicum and were going to New Zealand, the UK or Germany. This was an exciting development for the students and demonstrated a variety of partnerships the university had developed.

I visited Spring Hill one teacher school at the foot of the mountains. It had snowed over the weekend and some of the children arrived on toboggans. This is a fifth generation school with eleven pupils. The school has one full time teacher and a half time teacher. I also visited Monforton school which is a K-9 school. The lower grades operate on a traditional home class system but years 7, 8 and 9 take various specialist classes as well as home class sessions. The school also operates a gifted program where students are withdrawn from their usual class setting to work in multiage settings on various programs.

My next stop was Portland, Oregon where I spent sometime with the staff at the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory. This centre bridges the gap between theory and practice, research and action, universities and schools. The centre supports schools in writing submissions and seeking funding; lobbying for policy change, particularly for rural schools; advancing technology and integrating it into curriculum; community development. The centre very much has a rural perspective with 900 school districts in its catchment area.
I also visited Portland University and a number of schools involved in practicum programs for students. Many of these provided the opportunity for multiage teaching as well as small school placement to support students looking for rural experiences.

My final stop in America was the state of Kansas, where I visited the Crawford school district. The Superintendent of the region demonstrated the bus system and late in the afternoon I was able to see it in action. Most students in the area have to travel for some time in their education and most of the small schools have closed down and the children travel to larger schools. The buses provide an additional income for many local farmers but mean that some students have long distances to travel and spend many hours of the week on a bus!

I also saw the Crawford district school library bus which takes resources and a teacher librarian around the district to the elementary schools. This supplements their library resources and is online to the library at Chapman Junior High. Once again technology clearly plays a significant role in the education system, where it is fully integrated.

Finally I would like to share a little of my visit to the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Here I spent some time at Lews Castle College where teaching remote and isolated students plays a significant role in the life of the educators. I heard about the development of the University of the Highlands and Islands which will offer courses, utilise resources and staff from a variety of centres but not have a physical campus presence anywhere. The offering of a rural development program is a positive start for this exciting project.

As the island is Gaelic speaking most of the schools offer English as a second language. The island has a thriving publishing company which publishes in the Gaelic medium, a vital cultural link. The school support centre also develops and provides resource materials in Gaelic. Students completing teaching courses in Scotland are encouraged to complete a practicum in one of the Island schools if they are fluent Gaelic. There are many small schools on the island which are slowly falling in to disrepair and the authorities are closing them down. These schools are not replaced and the children then have to travel further or board in the larger communities. As the makeup of communities change the demand for services change and once a school is closed it becomes very difficult for the community to have it reopened, a challenge which faces many of three crofters on the Isle of Lewis.

My visits to so many schools, colleges and universities certainly provided me an opportunity to reflect, improve and move on. The rural communities I visited are facing the same trials and tribulations that occur here in rural Australia. The innovative practices that are occuring in order to ensure rural students a quality education are something we can truly celebrate here in Australia.