The experimental rural school Errol Street, North Melbourne

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THE EXPERIMENTAL RURAL SCHOOL
ERROL STREET
NORTH MELBOURNE

147 Collins Street, MELBOURNE,
C.1.
THE EXPERIMENTAL RURAL SCHOOL, NORTH MELBOURNE, VICTORIA.

This is a school originally established to assist in training teachers in Victoria for work in one teacher rural schools. It is attached to, and administratively part of, a large primary school at Errol Street, in North Melbourne, one of the poorer inner suburbs of Melbourne. The teacher in charge of the rural school is given considerable freedom to develop new methods and courses of study. Since 1947 his school has not been used as a training centre.

Taken individually, few of the features of this school are so uncommon in the Victorian state system as to warrant a special report. The combination of features, particularly the social atmosphere, treatment of English, and successful parent-teacher relationships in an unpromising locality, have, however, made it a place of interest to many students, teachers, and administrative officials.

There is little information available in Australia about school procedures, different from the normal, and no widely circulating professional journal in which to include them. It would be useful to have such a journal, but in its absence this bulletin may act a custom in circulating such information more widely than has been the case in the past.

The material in the following pages is abstracted from a comprehensive report on the school prepared by two former members of the A.C.E.R. staff, Mr. J. C. Kern and Mr. H. W. Hopkins. Copies of the report are available to borrowers from the library of the Australian Council for Educational Research.

K. S. CUNNINGHAM

Director
The school is situated in an area in which the standard of preschool health is amongst the lowest in Melbourne. Housing conditions are bad, because of congestion, poor quality houses, and the juxtaposition of factory and residential sites. The majority of tenants, and there is a high incidence of poverty even in times of full employment.

The experimental school is a weatherboard building 31 feet by 27 feet, in the grounds of the main school which is a brick building dating from 1874, with all the disadvantages in space, lighting, and convenience that that date suggests. It receives no special treatment from the State Education Department so far as equipment or supplies are concerned, and items such as additional blackboards, bookshelves, lockers, some physical training equipment, some library books, a piano, radio, trestle table and forms, have been provided by local effort.

It has about 30 pupils each year, there being usually one or two more girls than boys. Average attendance is about 95%, boys being slightly better than the girls. No very dull or unstable children are enrolled at the school; in fact an endeavour is made to ensure that only average or near average children enter the school, although once a member of a family is enrolled, it usually follows that the younger members of the family are also enrolled. In 1947, there were in the school 32 children from 29 families; of these

- 26 were the only children from their families at the school;
- 6 were three groups of two siblings each;
- 4 children had broken homes;
- 8 were the only children in their family;
- 8 were normally without parental care at home from 4 to 6 p.m., as their parents are working;
- 12 came from very poor or very crowded homes.

The average I.Q. in 1947, as measured by the Otis Intermediate Examination Form C, and the A.C.S. Junior Examination Form A, was 110. There was no noticeable acceleration or retardation.

The school differs from the normal in certain features of the time-table, in its treatment of English, in its parent-teacher association, and in its pupil-teacher and pupil-pupil relationships. Its school atmosphere is refreshing. The teacher is given considerable freedom to experiment with new procedures and develop new approaches to the study of the curriculum.

**TIME TABLE:**

This allows 43 hours of Mathematics and 63 hours of English weekly in the upper grades, and more for English in the lower grades. The organisation of a typical day is:

- 9.15 - 9.45 Free Discussion, News, Brief talks, etc.
- 9.45 -10.45 Mathematics or Number
- 10.45 -11.15 Culture Period
- 11.15 -11.30 Recess
- 11.30 -12.15 Health, Civic, Speech Training, Writing, Clubs, etc.
- 12.15 - 1.30 Midday Recess
- 1.30 -2.50 English
- 2.50 -3.00 Recess
- 3.00 -4.00 Music Art Science and Nature study, Physical Education, Handwork, etc.

There are about 30 such 'rural schools' attached to large schools in the Melbourne area. They assist in training teachers in rural school organisation and methods. They are in charge of experienced teachers, and show to the best advantage many of the merits of the small school where all pupils are in charge of the one teacher. The Errol Street Rural School is used for observation purposes, but not, at present, for teaching practice by students training to be teachers.

It is one of a small group of schools in Melbourne, called 'experimental' schools, in which approved new methods are tried out, and to which freedom is given to the teachers to develop new courses and different classroom procedures. They are, like all other State schools in Victoria, supervised by a District Inspector, but their success in using the freedom given them is an encouragement to all progressive teachers who wish to use the freedom they undoubtedly have.
The most notable features are the Culture Period, and the block time given to English.

Responsibility for the Culture Period, each day, varies from day to day, beginning with the teacher on Monday, Grades 1 and 2 on Tuesday, and ending with Grade 7-8 on Friday. Short plays, often original, are presented, interesting poems are read and recited, stories are read, and other activities appropriate to the period are used. The remainder of the school appraises the performances.

Although English is shown on the time-table as having one block period each day, in actual practice its various subdivisions receive adequate attention. The main emphasis in the teaching appears to be on cultivating easy, lucid, correct expression, both oral and written. Considerable use is made of 'free correction' by the groups of their members and wide reading is actively fostered.

Oral expression is cultivated by use of such devices as the interview situation, "littleman lectures," mock radio sessions, telephone conversations, school council meetings, etc., in addition to the Culture Period. Criticism is encouraged, but must be positive. Special care is taken that the Parents' Association knows what the school aims to do in this field and is encouraged to assist in achieving these aims, in preschool as well as school years.

Written expression is assisted by the study of carefully selected excerpts from the classics, and well designed exercises. Use is made of a number of excellent text-books specially obtained for this purpose and either in the school library, or in the North Melbourne Children's library from which the school borrows freely, and which is prepared to add to its stocks books useful to teachers for these and other purposes. It is essential that there should be sufficient copies of such textbooks for each child to use an individual copy. Without this, much of the work of the school would be handicapped, and much of the effectiveness of the English teaching lost.

Each English period usually includes some or all of silent reading, vocabulary training, appreciation of literature, exercises in written and oral expression, a little spelling, some functional English, and some group discussion. The individual work essential in this scheme is typical of the organisation found in a rural school where all grades are under one teacher. It is greatly assisted by the use of the textbooks mentioned. These are not officially supplied, but have been chosen by the teacher for their excellence and to suit the aims of his course.

Each Friday afternoon the English period is used for revision, additions, corrections, free choice work, and discussion of the stories, etc., for the following week.

Grammar is taught only on request from the pupils, and its functional nature thereby stressed.

PARENT-TEACHER ASSOCIATION:

There is an official School Committee for the Enrol Street School as a whole, and this Committee deals also with the Rural School. In addition, however, there is a Parent-Teacher Association connected with the Rural School which has a remarkable vitality, and expresses clearly the integration of school and community. The Association meets monthly, and discusses matters connected with the Rural School - financial, social, educational. The informal nature of the meetings enables family problems to be discussed as well as problems of the children and the school. Attendance is remarkably high, there being usually about 90% of parents present.

PUPIL-TEACHER AND PUPIL-PUPIL ATMOSPHERE:

The personal relationships within the school are apparently satisfying, since ex-pupils often return to the school voluntarily when it is in session, to ask for advice or to give assistance. They feel they "belong." This may, partly at least, be due to the close association of teacher and pupils in the management of the school. Great use is made of clubs, pupils' committees, and the Student Council. These are managed almost entirely by the pupils. The last-named is elected each term by the pupils in Grades 3 through 8. Policy speeches are made by candidates for election, and voting is formal by written ballot papers.
The Council deals with questions of finance, discipline, operation of committees, cleanliness of school grounds, etc.

Many matters of conflict between individuals or groups are talked out by the children either in the Council or amongst themselves, and only on rare occasions is the teacher asked to be an arbiter or a judge. The teacher usually lunches with the children, and many matters which might otherwise be sources of conflict are talked out during this informal hour.

At each afternoon assembly, the Student Council holds what is known as a Complaints Session during which the pupils draw attention to undesirable acts of omission or commission. It is an important rule that before any complaint can be voiced the matter has to be properly discussed with the accused. This helps to keep the number of rules to a minimum.

### ABILITY AND ATTAINMENTS OF PUPILS:

In order to assess the results of the differences in this school by comparison with those in less experimental schools in the neighbourhood, tests were given of general ability, reading skills, arithmetic, and spelling (A.C.G.R. tests were used).

Every pupil from the Rural School was, wherever possible, paired with a pupil of similar age, sex, grade, and intelligence from one of the less experimental schools, and statistical tests applied to the scores obtained by these groups of matched pairs to see whether or not any differences found could or could not have arisen by chance. The results were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Tests</th>
<th>Rural School</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speed of Reading</td>
<td>Superior (less than 1 chance in 100 that the differences found were due to chance.)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading for Inference</td>
<td>Superior (slightly more than 1 chance in 20 that the differences were due to chance.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Word Knowledge</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading to Note Details</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading for General Significance</td>
<td>Superior (difference could easily have been due to chance)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arithmetic</th>
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<tr>
<td>Division:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtraction:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiplication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanical Arithmetic</td>
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| Spelling: | Rural School superior but results could easily have been due to chance. |

These results do not, of course, indicate what factor is responsible for the general superiority of the Rural School - whether it is teacher time allotment, methods, or school atmosphere or some other undisclosed factor. To isolate the cause would require a very comprehensive investigation.