Right solution, wrong problem: The WA Curriculum Framework and student outcomes in remote and rural schools.

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The new WA Curriculum Framework is a comprehensive and elegant document. Based on thorough and extensive consultation with the community, it offers an outcome-focused account of the K-12 territory for schools. For many schools and teachers, the new Curriculum Framework promises to be a better curriculum solution than the mismatched mess of curriculum documents left to them by history. For some schools, however, the Curriculum Framework may be a good solution to what is the least of their problems. Schools serving communities in remote areas, for example, are often affected by low expectations and high absenteeism, clashes between home and school culture, and transience of teachers and administrators. This paper, based on a study of early literacy learning in six “difficult to staff” remote and rural schools, considers the impact of curriculum and other influences on the quality of student outcomes.

Recent measures of student achievement in literacy (Masters & Forster, 1997; Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993a; Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993b) demonstrate that literacy achievement appears to be spread unequally among different social groups. One such group is children who attend remote and rural schools in Western Australia. In addition, many children attending rural and remote schools are Indigenous children, and Indigenous children are over represented at lower levels of achievement. The results of the 1996 National English Literacy Survey (Masters & Forster, 1997, p. 20) report that students in the Special Indigenous Sample were achieving at levels of literacy three to four year levels below students in the main sample. While the cultural appropriateness of the tasks used to collect the data could be questioned, there is nevertheless evidence that the educational achievement of Aboriginal people is well below that of non-Aboriginal people in Western Australia (Western Australia, 1994).

The Study
The study on which this paper is based tracks the progress of a number of children in rural schools in Western Australia as they move from their pre-primary year into their first years of formal schooling, and seeks to identify pedagogical practices which will facilitate the progress of the indigenous children in particular. The six schools comprised three district high schools and three primary schools in two Education Districts. They were representative of a range of different contexts and locations, including small and large mining towns, remote area communities and a wheatbelt community. Approximately three per cent of children in School 6 were Aboriginal, compared to approximately 98 per cent in School 5. In the other schools, between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of the students were Aboriginal.

1 The focus of this study is on Aboriginal children attending remote and rural schools in Western Australia, therefore the term ‘Aboriginal’ has been preferred to the term ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ or ‘Indigenous’, except where these terms appear in data drawn from other sources.
Qualitative data were collected during 1998 and 1999, through participant observation in pre-primary, year one and year two classrooms; informal and extended interviews with teachers, Aboriginal Education Workers, Teacher Aides, Principals and their deputies; and by collecting various leaflets, pamphlets and newsletters through which schools communicate with parents and members of the wider community. A total of 19 teachers agreed to participate in the study during 1998. An extended interview program was conducted with nine of the teachers, to gain more insight into the ways in which they went about their teaching of literacy and the range of issues which impacted upon their teaching. In addition, eight children from the study were selected as focus children, in order to more closely observe the impact of classroom and school practices on their literacy development.

Reena's story
Reena was one of the focus children in the study of 100 Children Go To School (Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland & Reid, 1997). From the second term of the 5-year-old (pre-primary) year, she attended school in Gibbs Crossing, a remote desert community in Western Australia. However, because of family circumstances, she and her brothers and sisters also spent extended periods of time attending Emu Plains District High School, one of the schools in the current study. Because Reena was known to us through a previous study, we had the opportunity to describe Reena's progress within the WA school system over a period of four years, from age five to the present day, aged eight.

Pre-primary
Reena is physically very small and slight. She was born with meningitis, and according to her parents, she had been thought to be deaf and had not learned to walk until she was about two and a half years old. The pre-school curriculum at Gibbs Crossing included structured activities intended to introduce the children to colours, shapes and numbers; finger plays to develop counting and language; free play with puzzles, blocks and other construction materials; shared reading and outside play. The curriculum also attempted to establish routines and provide examples of the behaviours deemed to be required at school and in the wider community.

At pre-school, Reena was an enthusiastic participant in most class activities and was keen to please her teachers. She appeared to become engaged in and concentrate on activities of a practical nature, such as colouring in and cutting out. She also clearly enjoyed interacting with books, in particular being read to in a one-to-one situation. Reena's progress in literacy has been monitored since this time, using measures such as an Environmental Print Test (Hill et al, 1997), Concepts about Print (Clay, 1993), Letter Identification (Clay, 1993), book reading behaviours on text gradients (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), and by the collection of writing samples. By the end of her pre-school year, Reena was able to identify and name two capital letters (Clay, 1993); R for Reena and Z for Zondra (her younger sister). She did not score on the Concepts about Print test, and looked through a book, talking conversationally about the pictures.

Year One
The following year, Reena moved into a composite junior primary class at Gibbs Crossing. Although there were approximately twenty year one, two and three children on the roll, there were often only eleven or twelve children present on any given day. On some occasions there could be as few as four or five children attending school. Reena and her brother and sister were considered to be regular attenders. The junior
primary class was taken by Megan, one of the three teachers new to the school that year. Of these three teachers, Megan was the most experienced, having taught an upper primary class at another remote area school and in the metropolitan area, and as a consequence of this previous experience, she was assigned to the junior primary classroom.

In the junior primary classroom, the routines and behaviours required for successful school participation were once again reinforced. During the first part of the morning, the whole school were assigned to reading groups which were not necessarily related to their actual class groups; often these groups were taken by a teacher who was not their class teacher. Reena was in the beginners’ reading group, taken by her class teacher. The children read in turn from a book from the *Endeavour Reading Series*, then worked on drills and played games with flashcards of words taken from the current reader. When Reena’s turn to read came, she appeared to be reading quite fluently, but closer attention indicated that she had in fact learned many of the words and phrases from the book off by heart. Sometimes she missed a word or phrase completely, sometimes she used a phrase in the wrong place; often she was looking around the room as she ‘read’ and not attending to the print at all.

Towards the end of term three, the junior primary teacher left the school, and was relaced by Catherine, one of the graduate teachers who had joined the school at the same time as Megan. Catherine was young, bright and enthusiastic; bubbling over with energy. Until this time, Catherine had worked as a support teacher at the school, teaching “special education” classes, and taking drama, art and physical education in the mainstream classes to provide teachers with DOTT (duties other than teaching) time. This was the opportunity that Catherine had been waiting for as she took her first tentative steps to becoming a fully-fledged classroom teacher.

By this time, Reena could count and identify numerals from 1 to 4, and could identify a total of 12 upper and lower case letters by name or by sound (Clay, 1993). She was beginning to develop some concepts about print (Clay, 1993); the front cover of a book, that print carries a message and that the left page is read before the right. Reena’s writing sample at this time demonstrates that she was beginning to use strings of letter-like formations. However, she persistently started to write at the right-hand side of the page and worked towards the left.
Year Two

Reena went into year two with Catherine as her teacher. At this time, there were a number of new enrolments at Gibbs Crossing, and another teacher was employed, which meant that Catherine’s class expanded and became a year one/two class. Towards the end of the previous year, Reena’s progress was considered to be slow. A specialist had come from the District Office to assess her, and as a result of this assessment, it was suggested that Reena was of below average intelligence and might be a candidate for the special education class. Her early illness was cited as a possible cause of this. Catherine, however, refused to accept that Reena was not capable of making steady progress:

I made her my special project...she was a professional challenge for me as she was generally seen as a lost cause by both her parents and the other teachers...everyone said, she’s never going to get better...try and not get upset when you don’t get anywhere [with her].

Catherine worked hard to make her classroom a place where children experienced success (Hunter & Louden, 1999). She developed caring and respectful relationships with the children and their families, and participated in many community activities. She spent many hours poring over the children’s work, looking closely at what they could do and working out how she could effectively take them on to the next step. She devised programs of work which would encourage the children to enjoy learning and develop their enthusiasm. Her programs allowed for the explicit teaching and practice of key concepts and skills, broken down into small, achievable steps.

By the time of my next visit to Gibbs Crossing, in term three, 1998, Catherine had relaxed into her role as classroom teacher and felt confident that she knew how to help the children make progress. Reena was staying with relatives in Emu Plains, but her writing sample demonstrated the progress she had made. This piece of writing had been scaffolded, firstly by modelling the activity and secondly by the provision a framework
for writing: My name is, I live in, I am ... years old, I like to, My friend's name is...  The writing was further scaffolded by using the print around the room as a resource for spelling.

![Writing sample, 1998, Year two](image)

Two weeks later, I arrived at Emu Plains, hoping to catch up with Reena and her family. She had been attending the school for most of that term, but the teacher reported that she had not been at school for the past week. There was some initial confusion as to whether the child who had been attending Emu Plains was indeed Reena, for two reasons: Instead of being placed in the year two class at Emu Plains, which would have been the correct one for her chronological age, Reena had been placed in the year one class. When I was shown her work books, I noticed that they had been marked with the name Irene. No one at the school was able to explain why she had been placed in the year one class, or why she had been given the name Irene. The class teacher told me she had thought Reena was a pet name for Irene.

I made some inquires around the town and discovered that Reena's family had left the day that I arrived. It was another week before Catherine reported that they had returned to Gibbs Crossing.

**Year Three**

Although she began year three at Gibbs Crossing, Reena has so far spent most of 1999 at Emu Plains. Her mother has required extended medical treatment in Perth and during this time, the children have been staying with relatives. Reena has been placed in a year three classroom. When the year one teacher left the school during term three, no replacement teacher could be found, and the only option left open to the Principal was to collapse the school into fewer classes. This affected every class in the primary school. Reena's year three class became a composite class of year three and year four children. On the day I observed in Reena's classroom, the regular teacher had gone to Perth for an operation on her foot, and the class was being taken by a relief teacher. When I entered the classroom, most of the children were involved in a mat session...
around a big book. Three or four children were sitting at their desks, supposedly completing unfinished work. One of these children was Reena.

The work that Reena had in front of her was a maths worksheet. There were pictures of various items, and each of these items had a price under it. The object of the sheet was to select two items which would add up to a price which was specified on the worksheet. Reena was having a great deal of difficulty with the worksheet, and appeared to have given up trying to figure it out. She was simply sitting, watching the other children at their activity. Once she had some help with the mathematics required to complete the work sheet, Reena was able to quickly write in the items as required and complete her assignment.

At this time, Reena was able to identify a total of 51 upper and lower case letters by name or sound (Clay, 1993). Concepts about print (Clay, 1993) were now quite well established. Reena demonstrated an awareness of book and print orientation, concepts of directionality, recognised upper and lower case correspondence and demonstrated that she understood the concept of a word. She was able to read a book with a patterned text with some initial support. When she came across an unknown word, Reena made some attempts to decode the word by sounding out, but she appeared rely more heavily on visual memory. When the unknown word was supplied for her, she was able to instantly recognise it when it appeared again in the same text. Similarly, when she completed the mathematics worksheet, she referred to the chalkboard to spell the words she needed, and showed no confusion as to which word was which.

**Issues which impact upon educational outcomes**

Reena and her brothers and sisters are typical of many children who attend rural and remote schools which are difficult to staff. With Catherine as her teacher, Reena appeared to make steady but noticeable progress in the development of school literacy. Catherine appears to have been a particularly effective teacher in the context in which she was working, but the features which made Catherine a successful teacher appear to be more connected to the “philosophical and ideological underpinnings” of her practice (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162) than to specific teaching strategies or curriculum content (Hunter & Louden, 1999). Reena’s story presents the opportunity to foreground some of the issues which impact upon educational outcomes for Reena and her peers.

**Low expectations**

Many teachers in the study were shocked when the children did not meet their initial expectations. They seemed unable to deal with this and, instead of seeing this a professional challenge as Catherine did, and looking for ways to address the problem in school, they located the problem with the child or with the child’s family.

I’ve actually got one kid and I said to him, well if I give you home reading, are you going to read it? And he said no and I said well I’m not wasting my time giving you one then....His mother can’t read, so it’s not encouraged, so I thought, well, you know, you’re fighting a losing battle, what’s the point of him taking a book home if no one can read with him? (Year two/three teacher).

Some teachers felt that what they saw as the children’s poor levels of achievement was located specifically with the Aboriginal children; “...some of them have no idea. I find
it’s the, like, I find it’s the white children that can write.” (Pre-primary teacher). Other teachers felt that the low levels of achievement crossed both cultural groups:

I was absolutely horrified when I took the fives over, as to how far behind the kids were. That’s both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. You can tell the kids that have come from Perth. Because they’re so much better and further ahead. (Year two/three teacher).

One of the teachers had been shocked at the way in which older children in the school presented their work. As a result, she had made colouring in a priority in her pre-school curriculum:

“I’ve noticed with a lot of the school they can’t write. They can’t colour in properly. This class are very good at colouring in now. Because I, I did it like, they had one activity every day, where they would colour in something, because, just looking at the rest of the school I don’t think, I don’t want this class to end up like that. It sounds horrible, but by year five or six, I think you should be able to colour in without scribbling.” (Pre-primary teacher)

Although she commented at the same time that the children’s writing skills were poor, she had opted to address the problem of presentation of work rather than scaffold her students’ interactions with print.

Experience of Teachers
Linked to the issue of low expectations was the limited experience of many of the teachers in the study. A high proportion of the teachers in the study were in their first or second year of service and only two of the teachers had more than five years teaching experience. For these teachers, their limited experience meant that they had few resources for teaching pre-literate children, and the pressures they faced seemed to make them less creative in their pedagogical approach. One clear feature of inexperience was uncertainty about the curriculum: “I really didn’t have much of an idea of what to cover, what I’m supposed to cover...I just worry that I’m not covering the right things.” (Pre-primary teacher).

The diversity of children’s levels of achievement also presented problems for less experienced teachers. They tended to teach classes as whole groups rather than in smaller, ability groups or by using Individual Education Plans. This meant that the children at either end of the spectrum were less well catered for, and this in turn often resulted in behaviour problems. In some classes there was a very broad range of proficiency: “I’ve got one girl who’s nearly three years ahead. She’s in year two, so she’s reading at year five level, and I’ve got a couple of kids who aren’t even at pre-primary [level] yet” (Year 2/3 teacher).

High absenteeism
Irregular attendance of some children was a major issue of concern for all teachers at all schools. Absenteeism appeared to fall into two categories: absenteeism due to transience, when the family were away from the community for a time, and non-attendance even though the family were still in the town. Attendance data were collected for the 163 children who participated in the study during 1998, by noting the number of half days each child was absent during each term. Table 1 summarises this data, by term and by cultural group, displaying the mean number of half days of
absence, and the maximum number for any child for that term. The minimum number
was 0, for all terms, and for both cultural groups.
Table 1.
Number of Half Days Absent During 1998, by Term and by Cultural Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Group</th>
<th>Term 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Term 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Term 3</th>
<th></th>
<th>Term 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean n</td>
<td>Max n</td>
<td>Mean n</td>
<td>Max n</td>
<td>Mean n</td>
<td>Max n</td>
<td>Mean n</td>
<td>Max n</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboriginal children</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal children</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their study of 2737 school age children in Western Australia, Zubrick et. al. (1997, p. 27) suggest that students with nine or more days (18 half-days or 20% of the school term) unexplained absence from school would be at “educational risk”; that is, they were more likely (3:1) to be performing at below age level in academic performance than those who had lower levels of absence. If a figure of 18 half-days is taken to be a benchmark for identifying students who are potentially at risk due to absence from school, it can be seen from Table 1 that the average Aboriginal child and some non-Aboriginal children could be considered to be in this category.

Attendance data were recorded for Reena during her first two years at school. Although at Gibbs Crossing, Reena was considered to attend school relatively regularly, these data show that during her pre-primary year (1996), Reena was absent for an average of 20% of the time. During term one, 1997, Reena was absent from school only 5% of the time, but in terms two and three this time increased again, climbing to more than 30% during term three, 1997.

Most schools in the study had a policy of removing children from the roll after they had been consistently absent for a specified period of time, usually two or three weeks. However, these children would almost invariably return to the school: “they might go for six months and then they come back; they might go for a year and then they come back” (Year 2/3 teacher). Although there seemed to be a core group of children at each school who attended reasonably regularly throughout the year, there would be others who were there one term and gone the next, to be replaced by a different group of children who had previously been elsewhere.

This transience presented a number of difficulties. It was often difficult to establish if and where children had attended school when they had been away from the town or community, and this posed a difficulty in obtaining students’ academic records. By the time this information was tracked down by the school, or by the time teachers had worked out what stage of development the children were at in order to plan for effective teaching, a considerable amount of time had been lost. Sometimes, in the absence of “official” information, assumptions were made which were not always correct. For example, Reena was placed in the year one class at Emu Plains, when she had been in the year two class in her home community, and which was the correct class for her chronological age.

One of the ways in which some schools attempted to address the problem of children’s non-attendance even when they were in the town, was through the liaison provided by Aboriginal Education Workers. It seemed that these people provided an important link between the school and the Aboriginal community and were a valuable source of
information about the various children and their families, but that this resource was not always recognised by the younger or less experienced teachers.

Some schools provided a school bus service to enable children to get to school more easily. However, this was not always successful:

There’s a school bus, they do two runs and they pick the kids up. But some kids don’t get on the bus. I don’t think the bus goes past the house or whatever, so they have to walk. And some of them don’t live far enough away to justify getting on the bus anyway (Year 2/3 teacher).

At school 5, where some children crossed boundaries to attend the school, the bus would pick children up from outside their home wherever they lived, and would drop them off at any pre-arranged location in the afternoon. One of the teachers described the impact that the introduction of the school bus had on attendance: “Although most of the adults were shy and rarely showed themselves at the school they were always happy for us to pick the kids up each day and for the first time the parents started to want their children to go to school.”

School 5 employed a number of strategies to encourage regular attendance at school. The over-riding philosophy was that school should be made “an appealing place where the children would feel welcomed and unthreatened”. This philosophy has provided the driving force for a number of programs which are run from the school, including a breakfast and lunch program, showers for those who want them, and access to health workers and facilities. These initiatives appear to be having a positive effect:

As a result of the bus acquisition, children from all over the town started to come to the school. Knowledge of the program became so widespread that we started to get children coming to the school who were just visiting but still wanted to attend school while they were away from their own community (Pre-primary teacher).

**Clashes between home/school culture**

None of the teachers in the study had completed compulsory units in Aboriginal education as part of their pre-service training, and only one teacher had completed elective units. Only two of the teachers had actively sought a position in a school with significant numbers of Aboriginal children. Some teachers appeared to be unprepared for life in a relatively isolated community and reacted in negative ways:

I thought I’d been sent to Hell when I first came here. I did everything I could to get away again - even thought about resigning. There are no Aboriginal people where my parents live and where I taught in my first year; I wasn’t prepared for what I found here. I did stupid things like going round constantly checking all the doors and windows, because I was living in a house on my own. My Dad showed me how to take the leads off the car when I left it at night. I don’t do that now. I’m still cautious, but I don’t go to those lengths. My parents still worry about me though, so I don’t tell them about what goes on here. They’ll get a shock when they come up here for the Show (Year 1/2 teacher).
All the teachers appeared to have an awareness that there were cultural issues connected with teaching Aboriginal children and living in a community with Aboriginal people. However, most of the teachers appeared to have a negative perception of these issues and felt ill equipped to deal with them. In many cases, this was compounded by new teachers’ lack of experience in schools generally: “some situations with behaviour, well I’ve never come across some of the things that happen, I suppose I’ve always had cushy little schools in Claremont where I’ve done prac” (Graduate teacher).

Several teachers were surprised to learn that Aboriginal English is considered to be a language in its own right. One year 2/3 teacher had structured a literacy lesson around the use of tense. Although she appeared to be aware that the Aboriginal children used tense in a different way to the non-Aboriginal children, she seemed to be unaware of the reasons for this difference, and therefore made no attempt to acknowledge, or demonstrate to the children the differences between Aboriginal English and Standard English.

In Gibbs Crossing, Catherine had made clear to the children the differences between Aboriginal English and Standard English (“home-talk” and “school-talk”) as the opportunity arose to talk about them. Catherine was very aware of the cultural issues which affected her children in the classroom and made many efforts to accommodate or capitalise on them to enhance her students’ learning; for instance she was flexible in the ways in which she used groups in her classroom:

If I wanted the children to learn a new skill I would use mixed ability grouping in order for the more capable students to scaffold the acquisition of new knowledge....If I were giving a test I wouldn’t sit members of kinship groups together, because of their tendency to copy. However, I would use this grouping for peer tutoring, so that the less capable child feels more able to take risks.

**Transience of teachers and administrators**

The Curriculum Framework offers teachers greater freedom to tailor their the curriculum according to the local needs and learning styles of their students. However, the transience of teachers and administration teams means that there is often little coherence in any curriculum which is offered to students in remote schools.

The fact that some teachers had taken positions in these schools because it was all that was available at the time meant that they were actively seeking employment elsewhere, either in the independent system or in the Government system through merit selection. The effect of this transience was forcibly demonstrated in school 1, where the year one children had a succession of three different teachers in one year. The first teacher stayed for two terms. She was then replaced by another teacher, who embarked on a somewhat different program of teaching. By the fourth term, this teacher had also left the school and was replaced by a teacher who had been working in a support capacity with the older children and had yet a different approach to teaching young children. As a result of this series of events, the year one children did not have enough time to build a solid and effective relationship with any one teacher; they were subjected to a number of different approaches to the teaching of literacy, and there was little continuity in the literacy program.
This transience was not restricted to classroom teachers. The administration team (principal and two deputy principals) at the same school was affected in a similar way, when, due to promotions, the administration team changed three times during the year. Only one member of the administration team remained in a position for the full school year. By the middle of term four, the team for 1999 had not been confirmed, which again made planning for the following year difficult. Table 2 below documents the changes in staffing at school 1 during the course of the study.

Table 2.

| Term 2 | Year 1 teacher leaves to take up another position  
|        | New Year 1 teacher appointed  
|        | Principal moves back to Perth  
|        | Deputy 2 becomes Acting Principal  
| Term 3 | Year 1 teacher leaves to take up administrative position  
|        | Support teacher appointed as Year 1 teacher  
|        | Acting Principal moves back to Perth  
|        | New Acting Principal appointed from neighbouring school  
|        | Deputy 2 position appointed  
| 1998   | Most teachers terminate their contracts, including all teachers from P-3. Approximately 4 teachers elect to remain for 1999  
|        | Acting Deputy 2 contract terminated  
|        | Acting Principal reappointed as Principal for 1999  
|        | Acting Deputy 1 reappointed as Deputy for 1999  
| Term 1 | Deputy 2 appointed  
|        | 2 Teachers appointed to Pre-primary (job-sharing)  
|        | 1998 Year 5 teacher takes over Year 2 class  
|        | 1998 Year 4 teacher takes over Year 1 class  
| Term 2 | Pre-primary teacher 1 takes maternity leave. Pre-primary teacher 2 continues full-time  
|        | Deputy 2 leaves to take up a position in another district  
| 1999   | Acting Deputy 2 appointed from existing staff. Pre-primary teacher 2 leaves to return to Perth  
|        | Relief teacher appointed for 4 weeks in Pre-primary  
| Term 3 | New graduate teacher appointed for Pre-primary  

While Catherine acknowledged the many difficulties of teaching in a remote location, she also commented on the importance of continuity and stability for her students at school:

[A colleague] said she was just going to take it six weeks at a time, and I said, well, don’t waste your time. The kids deserve better than that. They deserve better than to have a teacher for six weeks and then to leave, halfway through the term. ...[they] need the stability, they are much nicer when they’ve had the
same teacher for, at the minimum, two years. Everyone knows what’s going to happen. You know, they know, and the parents know the teachers.

Staffing Issues

Relief Teachers
Most of the schools in the study experienced considerable difficulties when staff members were absent due to sickness or for professional development. Five of the six schools were classed as being difficult to staff, and this was reflected in the absence of relief teachers. This situation meant that staff were normally unable to participate in professional development events, such as conferences, which took place during school hours. When teachers were sick, the children from their classes were split up and allocated to various other classrooms.

For example, during fourth term at school 1, the year one teacher was absent for four days due to sickness. The year one children were split into two groups, and one group was sent to the year 2/3 class and the other group was sent to the pre-primary class for the rest of that week. On the Friday of that week, the pre-primary teacher was also absent due to sickness. The Pre-primary Aide continued to run the teaching program and various other staff members gave up their DOTT time or sent their own class to another teacher so that they could supervise the pre-primary group. On two separate occasions, in two different schools, the researcher, being a trained teacher, was asked to act as supervising teacher when no-one else was available.

Appointment of Teachers

It should be noted that not all the teachers who were in their first year of service had selected teaching as a career straight from school. A number of teachers had gone through university as mature-aged students and had taken up appointments at the schools because their husbands were employed with local mining companies. While most of the young teachers had been posted to the schools through a kind of “drafting” process employed by the Education Department to place new graduates, the teachers who had followed their husbands had secured their positions by approaching the school for relief work and being offered temporary positions as they became available.

Those teachers who were employed through the Education Department had not always applied for a position in that particular location: “on my application I put as far out as Northam and I got here” (Graduate Teacher, school 1). Another teacher had been posted to a temporary position in a town near her family home during her first year of service, and she had lived with her parents. When the permanent teacher she had replaced returned to the school, she had been transferred to a school some 700 km from her parents’ home. She had gone to some lengths to try to remain at the school near her home, even contacting her local Member of Parliament. Graduate teachers appeared to feel that they had little or no choice in the location of their employment; the feeling was that they should take up whatever position was offered rather than be without a job.

Permanency

Only one teacher in the study had permanent status. Some of the teachers who had returned to teaching after a break had originally secured permanent status, but had
relinquished this when they resigned from the Department in order to devote their time to raising their families.

Teachers’ temporary status had an unsettling effect towards the end of the school year. Although all the temporary teachers who wished to remain in their positions had their appointments reconfirmed for 1999, this did not happen until the very end of 1998, or in some cases, during the summer vacation. As well as making teachers feel insecure, this also made it difficult to plan for the following year.

A teacher from school 5 described the issue of permanency as “the biggest issue in country staffing”. “Why would you bust your gut and go all out to do the best job you can in some remote place days away from anywhere, when there’s nothing for you at the other end?” She went on to say that when she had graduated, some eight or so years ago, it had been her perception that there had been few positions anywhere in the state that had remained unfilled, “because you knew, that after two years, there was something to aim for, you would get your permanency”.

**Conclusions**

Because of her early illness, many people initially had low expectations of Reena. Catherine’s persistence and belief in her ability demonstrated that she was in fact capable of steady progress. Although Reena is considered to be a student who attends school regularly in whichever community she currently finds herself, the data collected regarding her attendance indicate that she could be considered as being at “educational risk” in terms of her attendance at school (Zubrick et al, 1997). The pedagogical approaches that Reena experienced ranged from those that accommodated and capitalised on home culture and language (such as Catherine’s grouping practices) to those that did not appear to acknowledge any differences. Her own transience and that of her teachers compounded this range of pedagogical approaches. Reena had one teacher throughout her pre-primary year, two teachers during year one, two in year two, and at least three different teachers in year three. Reena would meet any of the “at risk” factors described in this paper, yet in spite of all these, she continues to make progress in the presence of good teaching.

The curriculum offered to Reena has changed a number of times over her school career so far, not because of any curriculum policy or documents, but because of the types of issues discussed in this paper. All the pedagogical approaches to which she had been exposed were allowable in terms of the Curriculum Frameworks. What variations there were in pedagogical approaches have been due to changes in teachers and schools and other circumstances beyond the scope of curriculum.

**References**


