

SPERA NEWSLETTER - May 2016



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Society for the Provision of Education for Rural Australia Inc.

ABN 28 272 704 401



From the President Mr Brian O'Neill

Welcome to the first edition of our newsletter for 2016. By now schools will be either nearing the completion of the first term or commencing second term and universities will be well underway with the new academic year.

A major highlight of SPERA's activities for 2015 was the National Conference which was held at Deakin University's Waterfront Campus at Geelong. This was an amazing experience and was ably co-ordinated by Jodie Kline. Keynote presentations were made by Professor Sabina Knight (Director, Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health, James Cook University); Professor Marie Brennan (Professor of Education, Victoria University); Professor Jo-Anne Reid (Head of Bathurst Campus, Charles Sturt University); Mr Gary Fry (Director of Northern Territory's Centre for School Leadership) and Dr Jim Watterson (Director General, Queensland Department of Education). The presentations were informative, complimented each other and challenged our thinking.



The parallel workshop sessions transitioned beautifully from one to another and were very informative. Special thanks to Jodie Kline and Sue Ledger for their work in organizing and co-ordinating these sessions.

One of the highlights of the conference was the whole group session with Josh Arnold of the Small Town Cultures. This session was followed by a workshop in which a group of delegates worked with Josh to develop a SPERA song which was performed at the Conference Dinner. Josh's session was sponsored by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and I would like to especially thank NCSEHE director Sue Trinidad for her generous support.





We were impressed with the number and quality of the entries for the **Australian Rural Education Awards**. **Congratulations to award recipients** – “In 2 Uni Regional Outreach Program” and Karratha Senior High School for their literacy program. Due to the high quality of the applications, citations were also awarded to the Cooma Universities Centre, ICPA Qld, Uni Choice (ECU) and “City and Beyond” (Curtin). Special thanks to Sue Ledger and John Borserio for their work in co-ordinating these awards.

Thanks to the generous support of sponsors, Queensland’s Department of Education, ICPA (NT), ICPA (Qld), the Toowoomba Diocese Catholic Education Office and Teachers’ Mutual Bank, we were able to award eight pre-service teachers with scholarships to attend our conference.



The lucky recipients of these awards were: Adelaide Ford (University of Notre Dame, Perth); Baylee Hardwick (CQU, Mackay); Kylie Cochrane (Uni of Qld, – selected through Ed Qld’s Rural Scholarship program); Lauren Schuller (Uni Of Qld – selected through Ed Qld’s Rural Scholarship program); Megan Barlow (University of Notre Dame, Perth); Megan Knights (Deakin Uni); Rory Quirk (University of Canberra) and Tess Madeley (University of Woollongong). Tess is interested in attending this year’s conference to present her Honours research and Rory was invited to attend the Northern Territory ICPA conference to speak about his experience at our conference. He was unable to attend the NT ICPA conference so I had the honour of presenting his address on his behalf. I have included a copy of his address in this newsletter.



Last September I had the pleasure of attending the Queensland ICPA Conference in Cloncurry and speaking about SPERA. This was a fantastic conference – well attended with a number of great resolutions and outcomes and terrific food. I also had the opportunity of meeting a number of SPERA members at the conference, including Louise Martin who is an executive member with both SPERA and ICPA, and Ross Jones from the Catholic Education Office, Rockhampton Diocese. It was only as I departed that I realized that I should have called all of the SPERA members at the conference together for a group photo. I will get one at the next Qld ICPA conference because I intend to go back. ICPA is one of our important partners. I did however get a photo at the SPERA stand with Louise.



Left: Queensland Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association State Conference held in Cloncurry – Brian O’Neill and Louise Martin.

Below: Northern Territory Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association State Conference in Katherine. Left – Brian O’Neill and NT ICPA President Andi Bracey. Right – Brian O’Neill with singer Holly Tapp.



In September and October I had the pleasure of being involved in a study tour of successful rural schools in New Mexico. The tour was organized by Professor John Halsey and Dr Michael Bell of Flinders University and the majority of the participants were Master of Rural Education students studying externally through Flinders University. Our New Mexico tours were conducted by Dr George Otero who was a presenter at the 2013 International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education (ISFIRE) in Perth and who operates the Center for Relational Learning in Santa Fe. Some of these schools were economically disadvantaged but were among the highest performing in the state.



SPERA President Brian O’Neill pictured with the Homecoming King and Queen (school captains) at the Santa Fe Indian School. The King, Queen and the members of the Royal Court (student council) were inducted during half time at the Homecoming Football (Gridiron) match.

Earlier this month, my wife Lynne and I drove to Katherine in the Northern Territory to attend the Northern Territory Isolated Children's Parents Association conference. This organisation is another of our important partners in the provision of pre-service scholarships. Like the ICPA QLD conference this one highlighted country hospitality and a friendly atmosphere. The motions were designed to provide a more level playing field for their children and highlighted the challenges that the tyranny of distance and isolation provide. At the conference we met an impressive young lady Amanda Tootell who runs a valuable service for the families living on cattle properties and in isolated communities. This is the Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) which visits these places to provide the children with an Arts experience and an opportunity to play with other children. Unfortunately this service faces possible closure due to changes in Federal funding. We also had the opportunity to listen to an address and a performance by Holly Tapp. Holly was reared on King's River Station and then on Flying Fox Station (both remote). She completed all of her primary education through the Katherine School of the Air before attending boarding school and then completing a music degree at the University of Southern Cross. In 2014 she was one of the top three finalists on "The Voice". Holly obtained her early arts experiences through KICS.

This year's SPERA National Conference will be combined with the International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education (ISFIRE) as outlined in the article below. In keeping with this international flavour, I have included an article written by retired teacher Derek Synnott regarding his experiences as a volunteer in the Solomon Islands.

Regards

Brian O'Neill

Do you have news to share? Let us help you spread the word.

SPERA aims to connect people and organisations with an interest in education and training to advance the development of rural Australia.

Our newsletter is a forum for the sharing of news, events, collaborations, concerns, ideas, experiences, photos and more. We invite you contribute to our next edition.

To submit a piece for inclusion in our July newsletter, please email president@spera.asn.au by Thursday 30th June 2016. Where possible, please include a photograph or image to complement your piece.

Newsletter editions will be archived for future reference on the SPERA website, www.spera.asn.au.

We thank you for your ongoing support of education in rural Australia.

Conference 2016

Rural Education: Place, Pedagogy, Partnerships, Possibilities

This year's SPERA National Conference is being held in conjunction with the International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education (ISFIRE) and will be held at the CQUniversity's Ooralea (Mackay) campus, on 28th, 29th and 30th September.

We are in the process of finalising key note speakers at this stage but I can confirm that two keynote speakers have accepted. Professor John Pegg (SiMERR) will be presenting a paper regarding higher order thinking as well as his experiences on the international education stage. Dr Miguel Angel Diaz Delgado will be presenting a paper titled "Educational International Leadership – Networking and its possibilities in Rural and Indigenous Contexts". Miguel is the Director of Interleader Network and has just completed post-doctoral studies at the University of Saskathchewan. His research interests include educational leadership through qualitative research.



Dr Miguel Angel Diaz Degado will be a keynote speaker at the combined SPERA / ISFIRE conference

The next newsletter will feature the other keynote speakers: Professor Unn-Doris Baeck (Uni of Tromso, Norway); Professor Helen Huntly (CQU); Dr Hernan Cuervo (Uni of Melbourne); Dr Erica Southgate (University of Newcastle).

PEPPER will be attending the SPERA / ISFIRE Conference in Mackay in 2016. Will you?

Learn more about Pepper in the next newsletter.

**32ND NATIONAL
SPERA/ISFIRE
CONFERENCE**

28-30 SEPTEMBER 2016

CQUNIVERSITY, OORALEA CAMPUS (MACKAY)

RURAL EDUCATION:
**PLACE, PEDAGOGIES,
PARTNERSHIPS
AND POSSIBILITIES**



SPERA
Society for the Provision of
Education in Rural Australia



SPERA, in partnership with the SiMERR National Research Centre at the University of New England, invites you to attend the 32nd National SPERA Conference and 4th International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education.

Hosted by CQUniversity's School of Education and supported by the University of Tasmania, the 2016 conference will bring together a range of national and international teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, academics, pre-service teachers, community members and parents who are passionate about rural education.

www.spera.asn.au
www.simerr.une.edu.au

**CALL FOR ABSTRACTS SUBMISSION
DEADLINE**

29 April 2016 (250 word abstracts)

Email submissions to admin@spera.asn.au

**NOTIFICATION OF ACCEPTANCE OF
ABSTRACTS**

19 May 2016

**AUTHOR CONFIRMATION OF
ATTENDANCE AND REGISTRATION**

3 June 2016

CONFERENCE

28-30 September 2016



A Volunteer Abroad by Derek Synnott.

I have been asked about the work that I am doing in the Solomon Islands as a volunteer English teacher trainer. I am working under a formal volunteering arrangement but please understand that government regulations do not permit me to mention the name of the school at which I work or the name of the scheme which has brought me here. I must also be discrete with observations I make and conclusions I draw as my assignment still has three months more to run and I am hopeful of further progress in that time. I suspect, however, that experienced educators among you will be well placed to draw accurate inferences about the challenges faced in undertaking assignments such as mine.

My background

I came to this assignment with 22 years of teaching experience in Canberra primary schools. For the final five and a half years I held a school leadership position as Executive Teacher in which I was responsible for the educational programs of a preschool, a Montessori school and the junior primary classes as well as teaching classes, either learning assistance or providing release across the school from preschool to Year 6 and in autism units. For five years I was the school's Literacy and Numeracy Coordinator with the responsibility for improving the teaching of English and mathematics, embedding best practice in the school in these areas and mentoring staff. In addition, I bore an administrative, compliance and accountability load. Inevitably this was all too much for one set of shoulders and it was always the Literacy and Numeracy Coordinator role which would give. Midway through 2014 I retired; while I enjoyed teaching and was confident that I was still contributing in a substantial way, I was weary of the administrative load that came with my school leadership role, retirement was financially attractive and opportunities for bushwalking, cycling and the study of art beckoned. Yet always in the back of my mind had been an interest in working as a volunteer in an educational setting and in September 2014 a large number of teacher trainer volunteer assignments in the Solomon Islands were advertised. I applied and retirement took a different direction!

My Community

For many residents of the town in which I live, life is hard. The only houses connected to the water supply (servicing the hospital) have done so illegally. Many houses do not have rainwater tanks and families, especially those living in rudimentary houses roofed in sago palm and therefore without guttering, need to collect water from community taps and carry it home. Personal washing and clothes washing is done under the same taps and in the mornings there can be quite a group waiting. It is a common sight to see women walking home, wrapped in a dripping wet lavalava (sarong) after their wash, carrying filled water containers or buckets of washing. There are large rainwater tanks at school and when they contained water, some women and children seem to be engaged in a continuous water collection cycle. I pass on to two teachers at school, who do not have water tanks attached to their teacher houses, empty wine bottles which are used for storing drinking water. For many residents, toileting is done with little opportunity for modesty in the sea. For this reason, swimming is not a popular expatriate activity around my town.

With the continuing dry spell, the number of women carrying water, sometimes heavy loads of many kilograms over long distances, has increased. My current accommodation is at the top of a hill above the public standpipes and, fit as I am, I find it a slog climbing the hill with a backpack of groceries, let alone the dead weight of water. At a personal level, I appear to have a lot of water in the four water tanks at my house because the house was unoccupied for three months before I recently moved in, although there is no way of knowing for sure. If I was to run out, I know I will not be willingly seeking the authentic experience of lugging water up the hill or joining the queue and bathing under a sarong at the public standpipes.

Unemployment and underemployment are chronic in my town. Many people try and make money through selling betel nut and the rudimentary roadside betel nut stalls appear to be the hub of community life for those with little to do. There are also several little grocery stalls in the vicinity of my house. I know that some of the teachers at my school would prefer not to be teaching but there is little prospect of finding alternative

employment, especially employment that provides free accommodation, free utilities and free transport home for the Christmas holidays.

The Solomon Islands is a devoutly Christian country and the religious lexicon does not recognise atheism or agnosticism. Some of my fellow volunteers come here because they desire to live and work in an avowedly Christian environment. Each teaching session at school and all meetings that I attend, at school and elsewhere, will include opening and closing prayers. In these prayers, God is regularly thanked for bringing me to the Solomon Islands and I have been described as an agent of God, although this description doesn't fit well with my own self-image.

The Christian domination of life was well demonstrated at Easter. Here, Easter was not driven by commercial pressures and there was not an Easter egg, chocolate bunny or bilby or hot cross bun to be seen. Nor would an event such as the National Folk Festival gain much of a following. If there was an excess, it was of devotion. In the Catholic compound where I was living, the beautiful sounds of the children's choir in practice wafted on the evening breezes for some weeks prior to Easter. In the week preceding Easter, the men's choir practised in the Cathedral, the women rehearsed their Hallelujah dance and there were communal meals most evenings in the kindergarten's covered play area. Adoration on Thursday evening in the Cathedral lasted for hours with a roster allowing the faithful from the more distant parts of my island first go. An appropriate greeting was to wish others a blessed Easter. Unfortunately I only heard after the event of the Stations of the Cross set up in the main street of my town on Good Friday morning.

The literacy problem in the Solomon Islands

Non-enrolment of children in school and student absenteeism appear to be chronic problems in the town in which I live, and probably other parts of the Solomon Islands too. The quantum of the non-enrolment can only be guessed at as there are no reliable population figures.

The analysis of the results of nationwide student testing indicates that literacy levels in the Solomon Islands appear to be declining. There is a real risk that unless decisive action is taken at the system, school and classroom level, the current generation of students will be less well educated than previous generations. This has been recognised at the national level and improved literacy resources are being prepared and literacy professional development programs for early primary teachers are being delivered this year, with the focus moving to later primary teachers in 2016. Obviously for improvements to be effected, there must also be sustained action at the school and classroom level.

The learning of English is critical. English is the language of opportunity in the Solomon Islands. All school tests and national exams are in English and competence in English is required for students to advance through the years of school. The syllabus documents stress that English is to be the language of instruction throughout the day and across all subjects, but this proves to be aspirational and there are probably only a couple of classes in my school where this is the case. As my town is a mixed community with many language groups, the language used for teaching in most classrooms is Solomons Pijin. In many classes, even English is taught using Pijin. The language at Assemblies, school functions and in staff meetings is Pijin.

My school

I am working in a large primary school of 670 students located in a major Solomon Islands town and, apart from a small church-run school, it is the only primary school in the town.

The level of training of teachers varies. A few have degrees, most have two or three years of training. About half a dozen are teachers in training with no teaching qualification; they are undertaking training by distance education while they are teaching. The level of English language competence also varies. In general, the older teachers (those educated in the colonial era and now approaching retirement) are the more confident in their use of English.

Staff members are expected to be in attendance at 7:30am with classes commencing at 8am, on Mondays and Fridays with a whole-school Assembly. There is a half-hour break at 10:30am and the second session concludes at 1:30pm (earlier for the youngest students), leaving the afternoon free for teachers' planning. On this basis, students ought receive an equivalent teaching day to students in Canberra. I soon realised that these timings too are aspirational and not infrequently students are still waiting outside locked classrooms at 9am and well after the break should have concluded. For the first six months, I was living in an apartment adjacent to the school and I soon learnt to wait at home in the morning until I heard the Assembly music or the ringing of the bell (a hammer on an empty metal gas tank), indicating that another member of staff was present.

There is significant over-staffing in the school. The potential for the provision of remedial and extension programs for students and mentoring programs for staff is clear, but the usual practice is for these additional teachers to be placed as a second teacher in a class. About two-thirds of classes in my school have two teachers. Generally these teachers split the class curriculum which in effect means that they are only working part-time. The workload inequities compared with those teachers who have sole responsibility for a class are obvious.

My assignment

My role is not to teach students - my designation is as an English Teacher Trainer and the people I am teaching are the teachers. My role is akin to what I was supposed to be doing as the Literacy Coordinator at my last primary school in Canberra, although there I never had the time to do it properly. In my assignment I only use the First Steps literacy resource (which will probably be known to the primary teachers among you) and I suspect that I know more about the teaching of literacy now than I did at any stage in my former teaching career.

After the initial weeks spent observing classes, I completed in consultation with the host organisation a plan for my assignment which had three objectives:

- increase staff capacity in teaching the English language
- increase the capacity of parents to support the learning of children
- increase the English teaching capacity of staff at other schools
- After about a month, this was augmented by a fourth objective:
- increase the English language skills of staff

Notwithstanding that teaching teachers was the focus of my role, for three months I took a year 5 remedial reading group (the approach was based on the reading recovery model, adapted for small groups rather than individual students) for half an hour each morning and I found this a valuable insight into the teaching challenges in the school. Otherwise, when I teach classes it is to model to teachers how to teach English. I started by modelling phonics activities (perhaps, in retrospect, I should not have been surprised that this was the first request for assistance I received) and then moved onto writing and reading comprehension. The writing lessons for junior primary focussed on the structure and language features of narratives and on descriptive writing for senior classes.

I made initial progress with the establishment of reading recovery-based reading groups, the conduct of diagnostic testing of the junior primary students, the fostering of a reading culture in the school and encouraging teaching in English. While the school administration was supportive in these matters, almost none were sustained once I stepped back from direct involvement and nor was the work that I was doing incorporated into an improvement plan for the school.

For the first two terms, I facilitated a staff professional development meeting one afternoon each week. I started these meetings at the nominated time with some fun literacy activities in order to entice teachers into punctual attendance and when the Principal indicated that enough teachers were present, I would formally commence the session. I had to remember to schedule opening and closing prayers which are a feature of all meetings and lessons in the Solomon Islands. Apart from these meetings there were no regular staff

meetings. In third term the responsibility for arranging the staff professional development meetings passed to a local colleague and there has been one meeting so far this term.

There is pushback, manifest as avoidance, from teachers who would prefer not to be engaged. My approach was to focus on building strategic relations with those staff who were keen and discuss with the school administration about how to structure my work to bring those less keen within my orbit, but this achieved little success. Again those of you who have worked in an educational leadership capacity in a school will understand the nuanced significance of the senior staff describing themselves as 'administration' rather than 'educational leaders'.

In August a whole school inspection was undertaken. Some of the inspectors' comments were rather pointed, including that English is not used throughout lessons, "You have to teach in English throughout", that teachers could not identify and meet the needs of students with a disability, that teachers did not deal with disruptive students and questioning how some classes could have two teachers. For their classroom observations the inspectors followed a timetable prepared by the school and they wondered if they were sold a pup. The Almighty was twice invoked to scare the teachers into doing the right thing, it being a "sin for teachers if this is not normal practice". The school nevertheless received the highest rating on a three-point scale.

I seized on the results of the inspection for a renewed push for the use of English in classrooms across all subjects and for the adoption of contemporary English teaching practices such as reading a class novel and having a time each day when students read. Then a few days later in early September, the school was closed because of the water shortage in my town, and will remain closed until it rains heavily, be that "tomorrow, Monday or Christmas". At the school assembly at which this announcement was made there was a fission of excitement among the older students as they realised the possibilities of the final option. This freedom doesn't apply to Year 6 students who are preparing for the all-important exams that determine their secondary schooling options. Teachers too were released for the Head Teacher said that they must take seriously their responsibilities to their families. As a result, the first and most important aspect of my volunteering role has lapsed and, given the long range weather forecast, may well have prematurely concluded.

Early in Term 2 I made substantial progress on the second of my volunteering objectives with the presentation of a parent information session on helping children with reading at home. There were 44 parents and grandparents in attendance, many more than I have seen at similar sessions in Canberra schools, and they were an attentive audience for 90 minutes. As with the staff sessions, I was keen that we started on time and again we started with literacy games. Whilst I prepared the content and the handouts, the session was presented by three of the local teachers (after all, they will be here next year to do it again, and their Pijin is better than mine!) I was mightily impressed with the quality of their presentation skills (and how they picked up on the my key messages) and I felt comforted that there was at least a core group that could continue to drive change after I move on.

At the suggestion of these local teachers we then implemented a scheme for providing books through classes for children to read at home. This process has been handicapped in the early year levels by a dearth of simpler books for beginning readers. The Solomon Islands has a superb set of reading books for use in modelled and shared reading lessons in early primary classes. These books, known as Nguzuz Nguzu, are culturally appropriate, featuring Solomon Island stories and Solomon Island characters, have a fine vocabulary and have colourful illustrations that support the text. Otherwise, the only books in primary schools are second hand books donated from Australia and New Zealand through charitable groups such as Rotary. My school has a reasonable selection of these books for classroom and home reading use for all but beginning readers. The fact that the books are often old and tattered is no bar to their use in Solomon Islands classes provided that teachers train the students in the care of books. Other primary schools in which I work are not so fortunate and one has no primary level reading books other than the Nguzuz Nguzu

books. This puts a significant brake on the implementation of a comprehensive program for teaching reading in these schools.

Some months ago I prepared a second information session for parents on helping their children with writing at home but that has twice been scheduled and postponed and has not yet been delivered.

I have visited neighbouring primary schools and the local school for the deaf on a number of occasions in order to advance the third objective of my assignment. Again the focus has been on reading comprehension, teaching letters and sounds (ie phonics) and teaching writing. The high school English staff were initially keen for me to have an input, with reading comprehension and writing high on their agenda, but the enthusiasm evaporated when I outlined the scale of the problem and the areas that needed to be addressed.

In May there was a further shift in my focus as the Ministry of Education rolled out literacy professional development for early primary teachers and I was designated as one of the trainers in my province. The preparation and delivery of these workshops has absorbed ever increasing amounts of my time, but given that I am mentoring the three colleagues from my school to continue the training after I return to Australia, it is now potentially the area where my impact may be most significant. Much of the next two months is likely to be devoted to work at the provincial level with the literacy workshops and teacher monitoring and support.

As could probably be anticipated, the seven months on assignment have provided highs and lows. When working in this sort of role in a foreign environment you are without the usual support networks and need find outlets, seize on positives and be able to draw on reserves of resilience. My lowest point was in mid-May when the feedback from one of the professional development meetings at my school suggested that I was being quite ineffective in my school and I felt that I could not overcome systemic deficiencies in the teaching of children and the management of schools. A week with my family in Australia in mid-June came at just the right time to restore my spirits. The subsequent weeks were more positive, but perhaps this is because my focus had altered as I became engaged in the arrangements for the provincial literacy workshops. The next month or so will be critical in determining at the school level how much of what I have been advocating will be adopted into the future.

The final word

As I reflect on my time in the Solomon Islands, I have gained a lot:

- * I appreciate the benefits that we have in Australia, including the opportunities that education provides
- * I treasure the natural world
- * I welcome times of quiet and silence in my life
- * I realise that a life lived simply is not for that reason less fulfilling
- * I have a heightened awareness of inequality and the need for social justice
- * I am conscious of the fragility of life
- * Families matter
- * Assignments such as mine matter, one just needs to find a way to make it work.

Lest this account appears to be overly negative, there is much to satisfy with my life in the Solomon Islands. I have developed a depth of knowledge of the teaching of English that exceeds that which I possessed when working as a teacher in Australia, prior to retirement. I am fortunate to live in a most beautiful part of the world and I have just moved into a house on a hill with a panoramic view of the ocean and a deck crying out for a daily wine-o'clock. I work closely with teachers who are passionate about teaching English and who have the capacity to continue my work after I leave. I enjoy a daily early morning walk with a colleague from school and I make contributions that others judge to be valuable with Rotary and in tutoring English (for free, it must be said). And, finally, I mix with eclectic expatriate and volunteer groups, travel to interesting places off the beaten track and have the privilege to observe lives lived simply.

Derek Synnott— 2015 Volunteer to the Solomon Island



Pre-service Teacher / Educator

SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITY

Apply today!

Sponsorships are available for pre-service educators to attend the 32nd National SPERA Conference, 28 to 30 September 2016, Mackay, Queensland.

If you are a pre-service teacher and thinking about a career in rural, regional or remote education, you could receive:

- complimentary attendance at the upcoming SPERA conference, being held this year at CQUniversity Australia's Ooralea Campus in Mackay, including attendance at all social events
- your travel and accommodation costs paid
- complimentary one-year SPERA membership, to enable you to benefit from the connections you will make as a result of attending the conference.

To apply, please write a brief statement (max. 2 pages) registering your interest:

- Tell us why you are interested in teaching in a rural, regional or remote community
- Tell us how you think attending the 2016 SPERA conference would assist your learning
- Include your most recent Professional Experience Report or a reference from your supervisor or principal
- Include a copy of your resume (max. 2 pages), including details of any previous experience you have had in rural, regional and/or remote schools.

Applications close Friday 17 June 2016.
Email admin@spera.asn.au
Visit www.spera.asn.au for more information.



SPERA
Society for the Provision of
Education in Rural Australia

Rory's Message

Greetings all, and a warm welcome from not-so-warm Canberra.

My name is Rory Quirk, and I am a recently graduated secondary music teacher from the University of Canberra. Towards the end of my final semester late last year, I applied for, and was the successful recipient of a pre-service sponsorship, awarded to me by the Northern Territory Isolated Children's Parents' Association. This sponsorship endowed me with the funds for flights and accommodation to enable my attendance at the 31st National SPERA Conference in Geelong from November 4-6, 2015. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ICPA for this enriching opportunity, and to describe for you my experience at the conference.



The first thing that comes to mind is the turnout of scholars and academics in attendance. I was greatly surprised to witness the presentations of, and rub shoulders with, many of the authors of the inspirational and informative research papers that I had read during my studies. Presenters such as Marie Brennan, Gary Fry and Judith Miller left lasting impressions, for their passion, sincerity and kindness, respectively.

Marie's words on establishing community-ready beginning teachers will stay with me, regardless of where I end up teaching. I saw how orienting oneself to communities as well as students can help to enable the kinds of relationships that are necessary for successful teaching. Her broad knowledge and opinions on the politics of education in Australia will also be remembered!

Mr Gary Fry's vast experience in leadership, and his work in creating equality for students in rural and remote settings conveyed a deep sense of sincerity and understanding, and his work seemed to embody the kind of action it takes to help bring about change for many commonly disadvantaged schools and students. The varied scope of his recollections and experiences in education were insightful and revealing, and his was the kind of presentation I had hoped to witness during my time at the conference.

Associate Professor Judith Miller kindly took the time to talk with me over a morning tea break on our first day - her intelligent demeanour and considered advice showed me the kind of people I was among at the conference, which gave me a lot to feel excited about and look forward to over coming days.

Another important and meaningful aspect of my conference experience was the smaller presentations - the music performances given by the teacher and students of a local music class, and also the young aboriginal dancers who performed at the conference dinner. These presentations were a refreshing change of pace from the sometimes demanding requirements of back-to-back intellectuals rightfully holding your attention for long periods of time, even though I was left wishing our presenters did have more room to go on speaking, more often than not.

The Josh Arnold presentation and song-writing workshop were of course, key conference events for me, given my involvement in music, and his songs and stories were profoundly moving and transformative, as were his tips on song-writing. I have since used some of the techniques I observed in his workshop to assist a class of Year 10 students in my final practicum placement to begin writing their own farewell song, among other projects.

The scenic and beautiful setting of the Deakin University Geelong Waterfront Campus and surrounds made every event and every day of the conference shimmer with an ambient elegance that acted like a secret ingredient in an already impressive recipe for an event bound for success. On a related note, one further aspect of the conference that comes to mind when reflecting on my experience in Geelong is the incredibly high standard of catering we were treated to during all of our lunch and break times, including the

The scenic and beautiful setting of the Deakin University Geelong Waterfront Campus and surrounds made every event and every day of the conference shimmer with an ambient elegance that acted like a secret ingredient in an already impressive recipe for an event bound for success. On a related note, one further aspect of the conference that comes to mind when reflecting on my experience in Geelong is the incredibly high standard of catering we were treated to during all of our lunch and break times, including the

conference dinner - the delicious vegetarian options and consistent, across-the-board quality of service and nutrition overall were truly memorable!

As a Pre-service teacher on the cusp of my career, to be part of such an intensive meeting-of-the-minds in an educational context such as this, was a privilege that I am grateful for, and in many ways, it showed me how much is really possible and even accessible for myself and others as professional people motivated to teach in rural and remote areas in education.

I should mention that the accommodation I was provided with while in Geelong was first-rate, and the hospitality shown to me throughout my time in Geelong, especially from Brian O'Neill and his family, was homely and reassuring.

I would like to give my thanks to Phillip Roberts, my lecturer of Socio-Cultural Politics of Education at UC, who originally emailed me the application for the conference, and also to the ICPA, who approved my application and awarded the scholarship. My experience at the SPERA Conference is one that will stay with me as I move into employment in the education discipline, and I am certain all the wisdom and inspiration garnered from my time in Geelong will continue to inform and direct my teaching practice and decision making into the future.

Rory Quirk – 2015 Pre-service Scholarship Recipient

The Safety Circus.

The Safety Circus is a joint production of the Conservatorium of Music, CQUniversity and the Queensland Police Service. The Safety Circus troupe, consisting of second and third year Bachelor of Theatre students, visits urban and rural schools in the Mackay region, in February of each year to perform in front of year 3 students. The performance conveys the safety messages of stranger danger, bike safety and anti-bullying.

The Safety Circus as a concept and script is derived from the Bachelor of Theatre Honours work of CQU graduate Hannah Barn. As part of her research Hannah found the year 3 students were most receptive to the Safety Circus message and that it was this year level which was seen to be in most need of being exposed to the messages. The joint production has been in operation since 2013 and has been shortlisted for a number of Queensland safety awards in recent years.





S P E R A

Society for the Provision of
Education in Rural Australia

Australian Rural Education Awards

2016 Call for Nominations

www.spera.asn.au

Since 1994, the Australian Rural Education Award (AREA) has been awarded annually to an institution, organisation or industry to recognise excellence in rural education in Australia.

Category 1

Existing projects that demonstrate a proven link between a rural, regional and/or remote school or learning context and the local community, and benefiting a defined group.

Category 2

Future projects that support new and creative thinking in professional practice aimed at improving student outcomes in a rural, regional and/or remote setting.

Category 3

Pre-service teachers or institutions recognising demonstrated excellence in professional learning practice in rural, regional and/or remote settings.

Category 4

Projects based in, or benefiting, rural, regional and/or remote international settings. Nominees may be based in Australia or overseas.

Category winners will receive a prize of AUD\$500, complementary 2016 conference registration for one delegate and a trophy. Runners up will receive a citation recognising their achievement.

Nominations close Friday 3rd June 2016

For more information, including details on how to nominate,
visit www.spera.asn.au

Your Executive

If you have any questions or comments for us, please feel free to write. We'd love to hear from you.

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