

"They have to offer the top subjects": A rural school and its curriculum.

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Introduction

In this paper I shall explore some issues surrounding curriculum provided for students attending a secondary school in rural South Australia. I am drawing on data collected at a rural secondary school which is the site of my research concerned with rural education, literacy and gender. Curriculum is an important element of the issue of social justice for rural students, and one which needs to be addressed when questioning what is occurring in rural schools which is leading to rural students on average achieving poorer academic credentials than do students attending metropolitan schools on average. Curriculum is an aspect of education which needs to be considered when working towards changing the role played by schools in reproducing social injustices which occur in our society.

Curriculum provision for students in rural schools is problematic for several reasons. This includes the range of the curriculum, and the depth or number of different subjects within areas of the curriculum, available to students. In an era of economic rationalism curriculum provision is a problem, as it is not possible for schools with smaller enrolments, and these schools are often situated in rural areas, to

reach the economies of scale achieved in the larger schools, which are usually, though not necessarily, situated in the metropolitan areas. But rural schools are in a position to deliver many other advantages to their students (Dale, 1991).

Questions about curriculum in rural schools

Some issues relating to curriculum provision for rural students were raised in May 1993 at the 'National Curriculum Implications for Rural Communities' conference held in Northern Queensland (National Curriculum Implications for Rural Communities, 1993). This conference came about because of concerns of parents and educators from the rural communities in northern Queensland with the National Curriculum which was being introduced at the time. Participants at this conference included parents and educators of the region, together with some prominent educators and academics, and leaders of industries of importance to this region. Recorded in the paper summarising the conference was the following statement:

"[The National Curriculum] has been imposed on all Australians, to fix the national economy, but it has not addressed the needs of local communities to enhance their own educational and economic needs."

(Gilmore, 1993, n.p.)

The nature of the National Curriculum was being questioned by participants at this conference, with their main criticism being that the National Curriculum had been formulated as a vocationally driven curriculum devised to enable Australia to become more economically

efficient in a global market place, but that it had been prepared in the industrialised south, well away from the region of the conference, which is rural in orientation. One question from the conference: "is the National Curriculum going to enhance the rural contribution to the National economy; or is the National Curriculum going to add to the 'brain drain' of students away from rural areas to the industrialised south-east?" (Gilmore, 1993, n.p.)

This question could be rephrased: 'How would the National Curriculum enhance the ability of the rural communities of the nation to operate a diverse range of rural industries more efficiently, and more effectively in the world economy, for the benefit of rural communities and the nation which they enrich? This is an important question given that rural communities wish to continue to thrive in order to enrich their participants, and to continue the vital and substantial contribution they presently make to the wealth of Australia (1).

Some students at rural schools, and their parents, have additional goals for the rural education of younger members of rural communities. Within almost, if not every, rural community, there is a group of parents who want their children to receive an education that will enable those who do not wish to remain in the rural sector to be fitted for lives in metropolitan Australia and able to interact and compete with urban Australians on an equal basis. That is, they do not wish students from rural secondary schools to be disadvantaged by a curriculum which is not equal that available in many metropolitan

educational institutions. The conference asked in its conclusion:

"Will the National Curriculum provide our children in rural areas with the widest possible range of choices from which to choose a life-style; and will it address the needs of local economies and industry to develop the technical and managerial techniques necessary to continue to support the National economy in the way we always have?"

(Gilmore, 1993, n.p.)

Therefore the curriculum of rural secondary schools needs to suit the needs of those who will remain in rural communities for all or most of their lives, and at the same time also benefit those who wish to leave their rural communities, for what ever reasons, so they will have viable post-school options. Yet at the same time the curriculum available to rural students was seen as needing to avoid attributing status to selected students and subjects in such a way that the best students would be attracted (or 'drained') away from their rural communities. Rural secondary schools which are to provide valuable experiences and credentials for all sectors of their school populations need to be able to provide a wide range of curriculum options.

Often the definition of rural, and all that pertains to rural, is discussed in terms of deficits (Gilmore, 1993; Redman, 1991; Partington, 1989). This includes rural education, where some parents resent the education available in rural schools for their students, as they believe it is limiting. If rural students are stereotyped, they are generally seen as being practically oriented, and not academic (Henry, 1989). Mary Henry points out that this stereotyping is

discriminatory, and summarises the problem this way:

"It is a blatant denial of education's *raison d'être* to presume lower intelligence in any child or group of children, without attempting to devise appropriate strategies to teach that audience. This is not to suggest 'appropriate' means 'rural' (in the sense of farming for boys and domesticity for girls) but 'appropriate' in that teachers would taken into account the experiences of the children they are teaching and use that to inspire them to achieve their academic potential. It is not academic chauvinism or ethnocentricity to abhor the practice of dismissing country children as non-intellectual, but a very real concern that many of these students are missing out on a sound education, in any age when more than ever high standards of literacy, numeracy and other skills are required."

(Henry, 1989, p. 380)

The issue of attitudes towards students, beliefs about student abilities and their aspirations, and that ideas about these in relation to rural students may be the basis for discriminatory practices, is an important one to consider.

Introducing the research site and two students

Data for this research has been collected at Gleesonville High School (2), located in a rural community in South Australia. Students come from the main town, and from the surrounding small towns and agricultural areas, including an area up to about forty kilometers from Gleesonville. The population of the town is approximately two and half thousand, and the surrounding district's population is almost as large.

The enrolment at GHS at the start of 1995 was 347 students, including 45 year 11 students and 53 year 12 students. There were 33 teaching staff at the school. The town is approximately 130 kilometers from Adelaide. There is a range of agricultural industries represented in the area, and some secondary industries.

Lower numbers of students make necessary a restricted curriculum offering for students in smaller schools such as GHS (McKenzie et al., 1996). Using a simple measure of curriculum provision, the coverage of the main areas of the curriculum available at the school, Gleesonville High School offers subjects at each year level which cover all areas of the National Curriculum, with the exception of a Language Other Than English (LOTE) for senior secondary students (3). The number of subjects within each curriculum area in rural schools is likely to be more limited, as a result of school size. Students are also likely to have reduced access to particular subjects, a result of smaller schools being able to offer any particular subject once, a problem for individual students where several classes are timetabled at the same time and choices need to be made between the subjects. Access for students is greater where a given subject is able to be offered more than once (McKenzie et al., 1996)

Issues for senior secondary students at Gleesonville High School include the range of subjects offered, the type of assessment offered for a given subject, and the teaching mode available. At year 12 some subjects offered by the school are publicly examined, some are school

assessed, and a few are publicly assessed (4). This is difficult as students seek subjects with the type of assessment they require or wish to attempt, and the school has chosen to not combine classes of the same subject but different forms of assessment. For students choosing SACE Stage 1 subjects there is also the issue of whether the subject will be subsequently offered at Stage 2. Some subjects are not offered at all, while others are only offered as PES courses. The students who made the comment I have used for the title of this paper felt disadvantaged because of the range of subjects that were not offered by their school, home economics for example, and by the necessity of studying German by Open Access.

Let me introduce you to Wendy and Cathy. Wendy and Cathy were two students who were attending Gleesonville High School in 1995 as year 11 students, and continued there as year 12 students in 1996. It was Wendy's comment which has given me the title for this paper. I interviewed these girls together during one lunch break towards the end of 1995. It was a joint interview as Wendy had expressed a preference for this situation. The girls' fathers are both skilled tradesmen, and one girl's mother is a trained nurse who works part-time at a local hospital. These two girls had hopes for their futures, and dreams of achieving modest academic success, although they harboured no ideas of stunning the world with their scholastic brilliance. They expected to need to work at school to achieve their aims, which they saw as modest and reasonable. They both said they wanted to become involved in child care or nannying, but not kindergarten teaching.

During their interview with me Wendy and Cathy called into question a number of aspects of school life at GHS which they viewed critically for a variety of reasons. One of the areas they were critical of was the curriculum offered. They felt they came from a less valued, less prestigious and less powerful group of students within the school. Wendy and Cathy were frustrated that the school was not providing them with the type of curriculum they wanted, while they believed that efforts were being made to provide for other groups of students in their year level. Instead they were having to choose subjects which were not the ones that they would have preferred to be able to choose. In early 1997 I found that neither of these girls had been successful either in completing their SACE, which is now considered in South Australia to be the basic educational credential which should be achieved by students before they leave school. I shall return later to these two girls and their comments, as I examine some of the curriculum issues facing GHS.

Analysis

Andrew Sturman (Sturman, 1989), proposes that teachers' curriculum decisions are made within a range of spaces or frames, which each restricts their freedoms in particular ways. He suggests that four frames can be used to analyse the curriculum decisions apparent in secondary schools: the system, the school, the community and the individual (Sturman, 1989; McKenzie et al., 1996). I shall use these

frames as a means of critically considering the curriculum of GHS, and looking at what is happening for Wendy and Cathy.

1. The System

The system, and the body charged with the management of curriculum and assessment for senior secondary students in South Australia, SSABSA, each has requirements of the school and the curricula which it offers. The system of which GHS is a part, DETE (5), requires all of its schools to cover each of the eight areas of learning adopted by the Australian Council of Education. In order to meet these requirements schools have spent considerable amounts of time having teachers mapping their curriculum to ensure that their students' learning is adequately covering the eight areas; The Arts, English, Health and Physical Education, Mathematics, Science, Studies of Science and Environment, and Technology. The requirements of this pattern determine, to a large extent, the nature of the junior secondary curriculum in secondary schools, and this is the case at GHS.

The senior secondary curriculum is determined by the pattern required to meet the requirements of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). The SACE is intended to take at least two years to complete, with year 11 designated Stage 1, and year 12 as Stage 2. There are a number of requirements which must be met for students to qualify for the SACE. I shall give a brief outline of these requirements. At Stage 1 students are required to take two units (that

is semester units) of English, at least one unit of Maths, one unit of Australian Studies, 2 units from the Arts/Humanities/Social/Cultural group of subjects, and a further unit from the Mathematics/Science/Technology subjects for a total of eight semester units. An additional four units of the student's own choice also need to be selected, to give students a total of 12 semester units (6). An additional requirement, usually met during Stage 1 is the Writing-Based Literacy Assessment, where students are required to submit a folio of four pieces of writing from specified subject areas. Stage 2 students are required to take at least 2 semester units in sequence of a language-rich subject, at least 2 semester units in sequence of a qualitative or experimental subject, and at least two semester units in sequence of a subject of their free choice. Students are able to choose an additional 4 semester units, and these can be Stage 1 or Stage 2 courses. An additional determinant of the semester units chosen at Stage 2, for some students, are the entry requirements of tertiary institutions, and the specific requirements for entry into particular tertiary courses.

The required curriculum patterns for SACE, and the tertiary entry requirements, place restrictions on students in the subjects they are able to choose to study, and on the school in the ways that it is decided what is to be offered to its students. These requirements can be particularly difficult for smaller schools where there is not the opportunity to offer most subjects more than once. For example, if a compulsory requirement, such as Australian Studies, which all Stage 1

students must take, is offered at the same time on the timetable as another subject, the student is not faced with a choice, but has to follow the requirements of the pattern. This is particularly disappointing for students where study at Stage 1 in a subject is a prerequisite for study at Stage 2.

The system influences the school's curriculum offering in an additional way. It is the system which appoints teachers to the schools, and it is the teachers who to some extent determine what the school is able to offer to the students by way of elective subjects. When I was discussing problems offering curriculum in the school one subject coordinator explained:

"You often get subjects also picked up because teachers like it. And a teacher comes into a school, settles here for two or three years, likes ... what's an example, enterprise ed, or a technology subject, or a home ec subject, TRAC,... really pushes it, gets it going, and then goes. Because you have got teacher interest, and that teacher goes, and you have got raised student awareness, often you suddenly find yourself in a bit of a hole ..."

Another example of such a subject is dance, which attracted many students at GHS for a few years, with the school regularly reaching the finals of the Rock Eisteddfod in SA, and being the winner one year. Dance continued to be offered for a short time after the teacher transferred to another school, but it is no longer offered as an elective subject at the school.

2. The School

School based decisions relating to curriculum include the ways in which the school timetable is organised, and the subjects which are compulsory or which are electives. Other school based decisions relate to the content of the subjects offered, the books selected as texts, instructional methods, ways in which staff are deployed to facilitate the teaching, homework policies, extracurricula activities, methods of class formation, and the nature of prerequisites for study at higher year levels in the school. Decisions can be made at the school level by the principal, school management team, the school's curriculum committee, school council, by faculty coordinators, or by staff as a whole (Sturman 1989).

In common with most secondary schools the majority of decisions about curriculum are made by the school principal and the school's management team (Sturman, 1989; McKenzie, 1996) with important curriculum decisions and major changes being discussed and passed by the school's curriculum committee. This committee consists of the school principal, the deputy principal, faculty coordinators, and two parent representatives appointed by the school council. Meetings of this committee are part of the regular schedule of meetings timetabled so that all relevant staff do not have clashing commitments, and usually occur fortnightly. Discussion of important issues is also able to occur at regular staff meetings to keep all staff informed of possible changes and important debates, and to seek some consensus for change

from the staff. Other decisions, particularly those relating to faculty concerns are made by the faculty coordinators, and can be discussed at faculty level meetings. Staff concerns, including those related to curriculum, are able to be raised at faculty meetings, or placed on the agenda for staff meetings.

Parents are able to voice concerns including those about curriculum directly to the school principal, or through representatives on the school council, but otherwise school council has little influence over curriculum issues in the school. Occasionally parent input is sought about a particular issue, for example reporting of assessment to parents, when an invitation to send a submission or expression of opinion is invited through the school newsletter. Usually such an invitation attracts a very small response.

At GHS in 1995 and 1996 the school timetable involved seven lessons per day for four days, with eight lessons on Wednesdays. The junior school timetable had seven lines, while the senior school's had six lines (7).

The six line timetable for the senior school was a new policy introduced 1995, and had been adopted to allow more lesson time for the senior students, and eliminate a line of free lessons or study periods.

The year 11 students therefore had no free lessons, as they were required to study a minimum of twelve semester units during Stage 1. However, teachers of Stage 1 classes were able to designate a lesson per week where their students were free to do work of their own choice

in the subject, or to choose not to do so if the class had fallen behind in the teaching program. Teachers commented favourably on the greatly reduced need to supervise the study periods for senior students, which had been quite difficult to maintain in previous years, as times for serious silent study, with all students present on time, or their activities elsewhere accounted for. One result of this change however was greater difficulty building into the timetable subject choice for students. The possibility of students taking extra Stage 1 units was also removed. With two different line systems working in the school there was a problem with some teachers having clashes between junior and senior school classes. In such cases teachers needed to choose which class they would usually teach, and a permanent replacement was appointed for the other class. There can be questions asked about the value of allowing students to have very few lessons in some subject areas, but to continue them through out the school year. An example is agriculture where students often grow vegetables and study the care of animals. To confine study to one semester removes the opportunity for students to experience most of the cycle of the year.

Year 8 students were required to study a set course, 'to provide a broad educational experience.' They studied English, mathematics, science, and society and environment for the full year, and art, German, home economics, music, physical education and technology studies each for a semester. Year 9 students were required to study two semesters of English, mathematics, science, and society and environment, and for one semester, computing/keyboarding, and physical

education, with seven of these units taken each semester. Year 9 students were also required to choose an additional four units, including at least one semester from art, music and drama, and one unit from German, technology studies, home economics, and extension PE (one semester only).

The compulsory requirements for year 10 were two semesters of English, mathematics, and society and environment, and one unit of science.

Students were also required to select another seven semesters, including at least one from art, performance, drama and music, at least one from keyboarding, computing and technology studies, and any from German, extension maths, science B, physical science, geography, history, physical education, home economics and agricultural studies.

The curriculum requirements for both years 9 and 10 were accompanied by a note reminding students that they were not guaranteed that they would be able to study all the electives they had chosen, with possible withdrawal of an option due to there being too many students choosing a particular option, staffing constraints, or two or more subjects being programmed at the same time. An additional constraint not mentioned was too few students choosing an option. The German and music classes were taught combined with their respective year 9 classes. Satisfactory completion of extension maths and science B classes were prerequisites for study at Stage 1 of maths 1 and 2, and physics and chemistry. An additional option for year 10 students was the 'independent research lessons' (IRL) (8), where students had the opportunity to submit plans for their research or work program. This work was to occupy the student

for a term in place of one of the elective subjects.

3. Community

Although there is limited opportunity for parent and community input into the school's curriculum at GHS, and parents do not often take up opportunities to express opinions when offered, the school can still be greatly influenced by parent and student opinion. Decisions are also influenced by subject selections of the students. Schools which are striving to maintain enrolment levels are quite sensitive to student movement. At GHS curriculum decisions made in 1994 included withdrawal of a range of year 12 classes to be offered the next year, including physics, chemistry, and maths 2, music and agriculture, due to a projected staffing reduction for 1995. When this decision led to a number of potential year 12 students being withdrawn from the school, a policy was formulated about future subject offerings for senior school students, called the 'curriculum guarantee'. Although the formal channels available to parents and the community for input into curriculum at the school are not often used, the school proved in this situation to be quite sensitive to parent attitudes.

There were some important reasons for the curriculum changes for year 12 which were decided during 1994. Many smaller secondary schools need to subsidise the senior school curriculum offered by creating fewer and larger classes in the junior secondary years (McKenzie et al., 1996). In 1994 GHS was experiencing reducing enrolments, and these reductions

were projected to continue in 1995, and thus the school was faced with the reality of reduced staffing for 1995. This made necessary a reduction in the subjects offered for senior students as classes in the junior school were already quite large (9).

In 1994 when year 11 students and their parents were informed of the subjects which were to be offered, the greatest concern was expressed about the absence of classes for students planning to study maths 2, physics and chemistry. Stage 2 classes in music and German were also not offered. Another subject to be discontinued was agriculture, where GHS was one of the few schools outside the metropolitan area to offer this PES subject. The school had chosen to discontinue the smallest of the classes formed for Stage 2 students, but some of these classes were also the subjects chosen by the majority of the most academically successful students, and also the subjects required for some of the tertiary courses leading to the professions, and for the science tertiary courses. Some students planning to study these subjects did not wish to be dependent on Open Access as the study mode. These students transferred to other schools, and staff at GHS felt that many of the friends of these students then decided that they too wished to transfer to metropolitan schools.

This school's 'curriculum guarantee' was formulated and published as a means of making clear to the school and its community what courses the school would definitely be offering to senior school students, and how these classes would be offered. Quoting from the 'Course Offerings

1996' handbook issued to all prospective students for 1996 (10):

"CURRICULUM GUARANTEE

It is important that all parents are aware that the following Year 12 subjects will be offered face to face. We will also guarantee to offer face to face the appropriate Year 11 subjects that provide pathways to these Year 12 subjects. Our numbers in the Junior School are increasing and in the next few years the school's curriculum offerings should expand.

PES Subjects

English Studies

Geography

Australian History

Mathematics 1 and 2

Physics

Chemistry

Biology

German

SAS Subjects

English

Physical Education

Drama

Biology

Business Maths

Technology Studies

Art

Information Processing

Information Technology"

The school had responded to some of the concerns of the parents, students and the community.

The solution that was arrived at by the school was not an easy one.

There were numerous discussions amongst teachers about the difficulties of deciding whether to emphasise catering for the best students of the school, students who the school naturally wished to retain, both for the prestige of the school, but also for the benefits these students bestowed through their leadership and contributions to student life, and for the models they provided for the younger students. At the same time the teachers felt that there was an injustice in the school catering to needs of one group at the expense of another, and a larger, group of students who did not intend attending tertiary education, and did not have the academic background to contemplate the PES courses which were being offered. These students would benefit from some of the large range of more practically oriented SAS courses which could not be offered while the guarantee took so many of the school's resources.

One teacher when being interviewed made some interesting comments on the school's curriculum guarantee in response to a question about student resistance. This teacher believed that some students were

reverting to resistance at school as the curriculum guarantee forced them to take PES courses which did not meet their needs. The PES courses were guaranteed, and the school was unable to offer the range of SAS courses which it would otherwise have been able to. The school was unable to offer both PES and SAS biology and history courses for example. Yet this curriculum guarantee was very favourably received by parents. One school leader questioned who the parents were who were positive about the curriculum guarantee, suggesting that some of the parents who were in favour were also the parents who were planning to send their children 'away' for years 11 and 12, that is either to a private school, or to a large metropolitan secondary school. Several staff members, when being interviewed, suggested that the most pressing issue at the school in 1996 was the 'curriculum guarantee', and that it was an issue which needed to be addressed as soon as possible. It appeared that there was recognition that the school had responded to community opinion, and become locked into a curriculum offering which was not sustainable, nor necessarily appropriate for a substantial group of students.

During the time of the interviews the subject selection process for the next year was held. The school was closed for the day, and all students and their parents were asked to make appointments to meet with a panel of two teachers to consider the student's subject selection for the next year. GHS, in common with many rural schools offers a larger range of subjects, but has to eventually form classes for a smaller selection of these subjects, with the selection being based on the best possible

fit between majority student choices, and time tabling limitations (McKenzie et al., 1996). The counselling process involved considering how well students were performing in the subjects they had studied during the year, the subjects they wished to study the next year, along with consideration of how well they could be expected to perform in those subjects, the career aspirations of the student, and which subjects needed to be studied to keep appropriate pathways open. All of these considerations then needed to be fitted into the curriculum patterns required by the SACE. There were two teachers present for most interviews, to allow better discussion and to enable checking of knowledge of curriculum and students and ideas between staff for students going into years 11 and 12, or with a view to future subject selections for SACE with younger students.

The counselling day was the beginning of the process of formation of classes for the next year and drawing up of the new timetable, as the year level coordinators then spent many hours ensuring that the decisions made during the interviews were realistic, that the classes which could be formed on the basis of these subject selections would be viable in size, and that students had not chosen subjects which ultimately would not be offered or would need to be timetabled for the same time. Thus the negotiation of the next year's courses for some students was ongoing for a number of weeks after the counselling day. The choices faced by some students were complex, with some students needing to revise subject selections as the process continued. This

situation can be contrasted with that of the large metropolitan school my sons now attend, where students select the subjects they wish to study, check the choices against the career they are aiming for, obtain parent and then obtain counsellor signatures to end the process. As one year level coordinator at GHS pointed out, his school needs to have a student-centred approach to subject counselling and timetabling. He explained:

"...our numbers here make that sort of operation here rather critical. ... I guess schools either set the curriculum, or the students do. It can't be in between, and we tend to let the students. Then we get it almost ready, then we bring the other issues in, like staffing and facilities, and stuff like that."

The individual

This frame is concerned with the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers in the school about curriculum. These attitudes and beliefs influence the ways in which teachers structure their lessons, pace the work expected of the students, and the types of discussion they encourage or direct in the class. Teachers also discussed some of their beliefs about their students during interviews, and in informal discussions in the staffroom.

Two English teachers talked about having to provide many references for students, saying that they do not have the base of prior knowledge to

help them to understand texts. The comment was made that in the past it was often possible to rely on at least one student in the class to explain something, now it is necessary to provide many details to assist with the reading of texts. This was seen as a generational change, probably as a result of television, and the fact that many students do not read as widely today as they used to. It was suggested that there was a big middle ground amongst the students, who were relatively easy to challenge. One of these teachers commented:

"I love it when they say, 'Oh, this is hard.'. I think, 'Yes! Like, I am going to give you something you already know how to do?' ... And when I say things like, 'Look, I know this is difficult, and that's why we will be doing this, this, and this, and this is the end point.' And I model it myself. That's, I think, that's really important."

This teacher also suggested that more of the students, that is a larger proportion than had been experienced in other rural schools, seemed to be removed from academic pursuits. Added to this observation was one that the students who came from working class families in the town were less appreciative of education, and of what teachers were prepared to do for them, than had been the case at a large high school in a region city where that teacher had previously taught.

Despite these opinions about the students, teachers were more positive about the general characteristics of the student population as a whole, than had been the case twenty years earlier. One teacher talked about the ways in which the students at GHS did not any longer fulfil the old stereotype of the rural students wanting to leave school as soon as

possible and go home to work on the farm, or in the family business.

All the teachers I spoke to agreed with the way one teacher characterised the year 12 students:

"Good kids. They're always good kids. I've just finished at our school assembly saying that they were good people, and they certainly are. They all have their personalities and their characters."

One teacher mentioned the valuing amongst year 12 students of the more academically successful students, a valuing which did not exist in the lower year levels in the school. It was suggested that those students who were also excelling at sport were able to take pride in all of their achievements, and the transformation for the others was a gradual process which the teachers continued to push all the way through school. In a community where sporting ability is highly valued, teachers were attempting to increase the valuing of other abilities. One way this happens in the school is through the short story and poetry writing competitions. The English coordinator attempts to spread literacy activities through the year, as an attempt to "sort of keep some sort of literature stuff in the forefront".

One characteristic of students from the school described by one teacher, but not ascribed to GHS students in particular:

"... I don't see enough kids with the desire to know, simply because they want to know, simply because it's there to know, that

inquisitiveness about the world. So I guess there's a lot of kids who wait to have the information pumped into them, the essential information of the world. And the zest for just learning for knowledge's sake, is something that's certainly diminished. But I don't think that's any more in this school than my previous experience in country schools. But it does mean that they do tend to have a very narrow focus. They do only know what is going on in their local areas, despite the fact that a number of our texts and so on drag kids into the rest of the world. But most of the connections that have to be made the teacher has to pump in as part of the text."

That teacher added:

"I guess in my mind is this thought that everyone has got a standard set of standard knowledge that ought to be there for their world view. They ought to have a map of the world imprinted in their brain somewhere, so when I say Ireland, they actually 'Oh yes a little bit to the left of Britain', and it is amazing how many kids haven't got that. And, ... I guess there's certain sets of facts, a lot of it for me is the traditional European type history I suppose, but ah, there seems to be a lack of this storehouse of facts in kids' heads."

The two English teachers spoke of providing students with model answers, to give their students ideas of ways in which tasks could be done.

The learning tasks set in the English and science classes were a result of the teachers' beliefs about their students. There was much discussion in one year 11 class leading up to an assignment on the

"Real Australian". This unit of work was one which would have appealed to students, being one which was close to their lives, and a topic which causes debate in a highly urbanised nation where the rural is upheld as the essential character of the country, and yet in is far from the truth for many people. The students were exposed to a variety of texts, a range of poetry and two videos shown in class. I observed this teacher working hard to have the students recognising the essential parts of one video which they had been viewing. The discussion was lead by the teacher, in the initiate, response, evaluation format (Luke, 1995). The questions and ideas were generated by the teacher, and there was little encouragement or opportunity for students to express, and try out their ideas. Some of the ideas which were introduced in students' responses, but were not pursued in class discussion, did reappear in the students' texts. But on the whole the lessons observed were managed by the teacher who believed that the students needed to be exposed to ideas, given the essential background information, and have ways of talking about these ideas modelled for them.

The teacher of the year 8 English class I observed had strong ideas about what the students needed in the way of help with literacy. This teacher, who was also the faculty co-ordinator wanted the students to read more, and to have practice at oral reading, developing fluency in oral reading. Thus there was a lesson scheduled each week for silent reading, and other classes in the faculty were encouraged to include

this focus in their programs as well. As this teacher explained:

"I certainly promote it, that all classes should have regular reading in school. It's not enough to simply have them borrow a book and take it home, because any number of students won't read unless some time is devoted to it here to show you value it. And that works quite well. We are, well, the committee readers are always going to read anyway, but I think we are holding on to some of the middle ground, when I think society is moving away from regular reading."

The students, as a way of having the novel read by all students, read aloud in class, with each of the students taking turns. The teacher had a variety of techniques for assisting students to become more fluent and confident in their reading, with emphasis on what was done well and what needed improvement in their reading as they took their turn reading around the class. During the silent reading lesson this teacher also took time to listen to students reading to him privately, again commenting on reading and encouraging the students in aspects of oral reading where they needed to continue to improve. There was a similar level of care, and personal attention to students who needed support with written work in this teacher's classes. Another teacher of this class also commented on what he perceived as the poor literacy abilities of the students in the school. He too expected students to read aloud to the class, and had devised techniques for ensuring that all students saw selection as fair, and as something they all needed to be able to do. This teacher used rather complex systems for selection of the reader, and for student monitoring of what was read to find the points which were being sought for the classroom task set.

Implications of the school's curriculum for Wendy and Cathy

Let us return to the story of Wendy and Cathy. During the interview I asked them what they were planning to study in Year 12. Both Cathy and Wendy were able to tell me what they were intending to study the next year, but what they were unable to tell me was also interesting. So what subjects had these two girls chosen? Wendy was planning to do art, English, maths, business studies, and computing. Cathy was planning to do art, maths, German, English and Australian history. Cathy was continuing the study of German which she had been doing by Open Access for Stage 1, again by Open Access the next year. They were both unsure about what maths course they were doing:

"W: ...(continues) Ahm, we are doing business maths, aren't we?"

C: No

W: They haven't, you see, we want to do applied maths again, but so far, Mr X was saying the other day we'll be doing business maths.

C: I know, but I didn't quite get it.

W: Yeh, well, so there isn't enough numbers to do applied maths, so we'll be going into business maths.

C: But it'll be applied and business maths, so like ...

W: Yeh, mixed in together.

C: Mixed."

The girls were rather vague beyond the fact that they were studying maths the next year. Cathy was expressing the hope that possibly the class would be a combined class, but this was not what happened. This excerpt indicates something of the ongoing nature of the dialogue

between staff and students as the curriculum decisions were made. The girls needed to do a quantitative experimental subject to meet the requirements of the SACE pattern, and the maths was chosen to fulfil that requirement. Wendy was quite unsure about the business course she was going to do, unable to give it the proper name, and instead resorting to:

"W: I'm doing that business bit. Whatever it's called. ... I've forgotten what it is. I think it's business studies."

When I asked the girls if they thought that they had a fair chance to do well and achieve at school, I received the non-committal "Maybe" from Cathy. Wendy took over saying:

"W: What we always say is, if you turn out .. at this school at the moment, we would turn into mathematicians...

C: Mathematician, scientists, and lawyers, because that's what's mainly offered. Or English teachers. That's what it mainly is at the moment.

You see a whole lot of people are doing science at the moment, which is biology, and physics and what ever."

These two girls were questioning the subjects being offered to them at the school. Wendy indicated that she would have liked to study agriculture, which she had been able to do as a year 10 student. She would also have liked access to home economics. They indicated that they were looking forward to being able to do art, although they had been unable to do that as year 11 students, or had chosen not to take this subject. Apart from these suggestions they were at a loss as to

what subjects they would prefer to be doing as they had little idea of what was possible. As Cathy said:

"What would be better subjects? ... I don't know. That's all we've been stuck with, so we don't really know any better subjects."

Where students have the knowledge of what is possible, and the determination to pursue those ideas, they have more idea of how to go about getting what they want. Again there is the point about the louder voices being heard, and the quiet voices not being sought out.

The comments and the positions of these two girls about their subject choices for the following year reveal a similar pattern to that observed by Lyn Yates and Julie McLeod (Yates & McLeod, 1996) among the subjects in their longitudinal research involving metropolitan and rural students. They observed that the students from the rural community were noticeably less knowledgeable about careers and related educational requirements than were the urban students of similar social class background. This experience seems common among rural students. The most successful matriculation student in South Australia announced in January 1997, a girl from a neighbouring farming community, indicated that she was quite unaware of the requirements for entry into medicine, and later had to reverse her announcement that she might change her preferences for tertiary study to medicine instead of nursing.

In a follow up interview in early 1997 Wendy and I discussed her impressions of year 12 and a little of what she and Cathy had done

during the year. I discovered that neither of the girls had achieved their goal of passing year 12 or achieved the SACE. To complete their SACE the girls had needed to achieve 10 out of 20 for at least three of subjects, out of five full year courses, or a combination of full year and semester units. Wendy had experienced considerable problems with both art and information technology. In art Cathy and Wendy had worked under teacher direction, but largely on their own, while the teacher took a year 11 art class. They had begun with still life drawing, and apparently were very slow. Wendy explained that of the three sets of practical work they were required to complete during the year, she only managed to do two. Apparently Cathy had managed to complete the work to much higher standard than Wendy, and had managed to pass the course. There was a third year 12 art student, who was doing the PES course. He is a talented artist, and worked a quite different schedule to the two girls. The art teacher was in the position of having to manage three year 12 students almost as an extra to her regular teaching load and administrative duties, plus needing to assist a student who was finding much of the practical work very difficult and time consuming. The girls also did not comprehend the theory of art course requirements well:

"W: And then you also had to remember, ... well you didn't have to remember, but she asked us a couple of time, what did, oh, I don't know, but what did those guys do, and all that sort of stuff. And it was sort of like 'We don't know!' We did the work, but we still don't know.

P: You didn't understand it?

W: We didn't understand it really. We just copied it, words, and wrote it down so it made sense. And we didn't understand what we were talking about really."

Wendy had apparently failed to become literate in the theory of art discourses, and had reverted to 'making do' techniques for producing texts required during the year (Gee, 1990).

The conclusions to the 'National Curriculum Implications for Rural Communities' conference of May 1993 included the recommendation that 'Curriculum choices be widened in rural areas, using technology, open learning, networking etc' (National Curriculum Implications for Rural Communities, 1993). Open Access was available for students who wished to study a subject not offered at GHS, or perhaps a subject which was not available to some students because of the nature of the timetable. GHS does not use networking or electronic technologies to link with corresponding classes in neighbouring secondary schools. This type of cooperation exists between classes in some schools in the northern areas, and for another group of schools in the Murray Mallee areas of South Australia. Open Access was the only alternative for students to access courses not offered at GHS. However there are two problems with the Open Access option. Many local people view this option with suspicion, and have strong reservations about the likely chances of success for their students, particularly without the motivating encouragement of a teacher meeting with students regularly, and the interaction of classmates working on the same assignments. Another

problem for some students is realising the potential that Open Access can hold for them. Although GHS as part of its curriculum guarantee promised to provide in school support for students who were taking subjects which were included in the guaranteed list of subjects, and there was no such promise for students taking other subjects, it was possible for students to select other subjects for study via this medium.

Cathy was not successful in her attempt to complete Year 12 German studying by Open Access. She withdrew sometime during term 2. It appeared that she did not understand what was being expected of her in the course, and felt that she had no one she could turn to for assistance. Her original German teacher had transferred from the school, and she had not established a working relationship with the replacement teacher. Working unsuccessfully and in isolation she dropped out. Although German was a subject guaranteed to be available to students at the school, apparently adequate supervision and guidance had not eventuated for Cathy.

It should be emphasised that there have been a number of students from GHS who have very successfully studied using Open Access, one example being photography for which four GHS students were enrolled in 1997. This year there have been fourteen year 12 students from GHS studying Stage 2 subjects by Open Access. The most successful student at Year 12 in the results released early in 1997, Neralie Rowan, a student at a rural area school in a neighbouring area, had studied by Open Access,

completing a two semester course and two single semester courses. She received scores of 20 for each of her subjects, including those studied by Open Access. Neralie's success, reported in a local paper, included the following comments:

She said distance education had been more difficult than face-to-face lessons with a teacher.

"The distance education involved only one lesson a week by telephone. 'You have to make yourself do the work. You don't have a teacher there pushing you [to] do it,' she said."

Neralie was highlighting several of the features of Open Access study which are of concern to students and their parents. Many students at GHS, and their parents, believe that many students are not sufficiently motivated or academic enough to be successful in these courses without school supervision.

Another difficulty with Open Access study is knowledge of what is possible. Wendy did not study Open Access, despite having indicated an interest in the first interview in studying home economics. Apparently she only discovered late in the year that another student, who had transferred to GHS from a metropolitan private school at the start of 1996, had been doing this very option.

"But I never was offered. ... I asked for any other subjects, but they didn't offer it though, they didn't say I could do it by Open Access, and I didn't know what they could do through Open Access. Because if I

knew what they could do through Open Access I would have done Home Economics. And I would have done some other subjects that I would like, instead of subjects I didn't want."

Wendy sounds rather disappointed and frustrated here. Open Access study presents another difficulty for schools. Students studying by Open Access are not counted as full students in the school for that subject, and thus if many students are using this option there can be a further reduction in the staff appointed to the school. This is a disincentive for schools to promote the option of study by Open Access.

One important fact to note about curriculum GHS is that it is never seen as an easy issue. There was frequent discussion among staff about many aspects of the curriculum, identifying problems, and talking about possible solutions. These discussions looked at the practical aspects of the school's curriculum, and at the underlying philosophical questions. The most perplexing question seemed to be which group of students should be the school's priority, those who were the academic elite, or the those who did not fit this description, but had a different set of needs. Some of the staff were pleased that they were able to offer a process of counselling students into the next year's subjects in a manner which was student centred, and accepted that there was a considerable workload involved in the process. Although considerable effort was made to inform students about curriculum issues, course requirements, and prerequisites for careers, the students still seemed poorly informed, as Wendy and Cathy were, when they were questioned about courses they were taking, and the

possibilities available.

Some curriculum innovations and disappointments at GHS

An important introduction to the GHS curriculum in 1996 was the work experience program TRAC. This was a new work education course, where students were placed in retail businesses in the community to work for a day a week for a number of weeks each semester. There were also some other curriculum requirements these students needed to meet. During the other four days of the week students caught up on lessons in other. In its initial year some students who had considered work education a possible course option veered away from a course which was new and unknown, and opted for other courses instead.

The TRAC program required the establishment of a committee made up largely of business people in the community who were willing to participate in the program, and this committee liaised closely with the school. After a successful initial year, the program was extensively enlarged for 1997, with five surrounding secondary schools also participating, and a larger range of placements offered. There are two programs, hospitality and retail/office programs available to students, each with specific curriculum requirements. Hospitality is available at Stage 1 and retail/office is offered at Stages 1 and 2. This program has involved a large cooperative venture in which GHS is involved with neighbouring schools, and it is currently administered from GHS. The concentration in the first year the course was offered on retail positions, was intended to keep the program simple as it was very new

for all schools. However, this limited the range of experiences to which students could be exposed, and did not include any positions involving technology, nor did it link students with any industries important to the district.

One person raised with me the question of the demise of agricultural science which had disappeared from the senior school curriculum in 1995 as a result of the need to curtail the curriculum options for year 12 students. For five years GHS was one of very few schools, apart from the agricultural high school located in Adelaide, to offer agriculture as a PES course, thus counting as part of the requirements for entry into many university courses. Apparently it was not just students from farming families who took the course, although it was popular with such students and particularly those intending to go into the family' farming business. Another group of students also chose agriculture as the science subject they wished to do, and often it was girls who excelled in the course, and who were dux of the subject at the end of year 12. It was felt that many students received much higher points from this subject than they would from an alternative, and usually from any other course they took, thus providing them with a good advantage in their academic credentials. Thus agricultural science was an important option for these students. What had been the advantages of offering agricultural science as a PES course? Students in the school were able to pick up an interest in junior school, perhaps choosing the subject out of curiosity, deciding they liked it, and continuing with

it into senior school. The students were then well equipped to continue with this study after secondary school if they wished, and the course did provide a number of pathways into employment, training or further education. It is estimated that in the five years the school offered the course, twenty-seven students went on to study agriculture at a tertiary level. No student had gone on to tertiary studies in agriculture since the year 12 class was omitted from the subjects offered (11). The demise of agriculture at year 12 has created a difficult situation for this subject area in the school. Now, students who wish to take this course at year 11 need to be advised to think carefully, as there is the high probability of there being no class at year 12 for them to continue. In 1996 seven students sought to do agriculture in 1997 at Stage 1, but due to the small number the students were counselled to transfer to other classes, and none of these students have opted to do the course by Open Access.

One member of the school's administration team expressed concern that the emphasis in the school is on having the students meet the SACE pattern requirements, rather than working to build a course which fits the individual students, their interests and their strengths and weaknesses.

Some conclusions

Education is a social institution which ideally is concerned with the care and nurturing of all individuals. However discussions about curriculum and outcomes from education for individuals and their rural

communities are made difficult by the many frames which influence curriculum. With so many influences on the curriculum of the school there is little space or incentive for the school to consider how to ask questions about building appropriate and adequate courses, particularly for non-elite students.

Despite the student centred approach to curriculum and placement of students into subjects at GHS, it is difficult for the school to meet the needs of all its students adequately. Large classes in the junior secondary years make it possible to increase the subjects offered to senior school students, but these students still have access to fewer subjects than would be ideal.

For a variety of reasons some subjects are seen as more important and more prestigious than others, by tertiary institutions, students, parents, the community, and by the school. Equally some students see themselves as 'other' or 'lesser' than another group of students. There is a stereotyping of students, which has unfortunate consequences for many students.

To close, I would like to share a quotation to ponder as questions about curriculum provision are considered, and concerns about outcomes for students are at the forefront of thinking about education:

In a society in which dependence on successful schooling is practically universal, wide differences in educational outcomes cannot be tolerated. This is partly because individuals with the weakest results

will be continually vulnerable to economic and social change and will be robbed of their individuality. But it is also because the education system itself, having crystallized around the strengths of its strongest users and become rigid and resistant to the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable, becomes an object of institutional protection and narrow social strategies in which care and nurturing of all individuals is no longer the guiding value.

(Teese, McLean & Polese
1993; p. 1)

Endnotes:

1 Gilmore's 'Conclusion and Summary' includes, as a precursor to the question quoted above, the information that 80% of the nation's export income comes from rural areas, with 45% of that being generated by the 6% of the population living north of the Tropic of Capricorn.

2 In this paper the names of all students and the name of their school are fictitious.

3 The LOTE subject offered in the school is German. This subject was offered to all year 8 students for one semester, and then as a full year elective course for students in years 9 and 10, with these students in a combined class. Students wishing to continue studying German in the senior secondary years need to study by Open Access, ie distance education.

4 PES - Publicly Examined Subject; SAS - School Assessed Subject; PAS - Publicly Assessed Subject. A minimum of four out of five subjects is required to be PES for university entrance at Adelaide University. For

entry to the University of South Australia five PES or PAS subjects are required, with some prerequisites for specific courses. University of South Australia diploma courses accept PES, PAS and two unit SAS subjects for entry. There are restrictions on the possible combinations of PES and PAS or SAS subjects. Only two semester length subjects are allowed for entry to University of South Australia courses. 11 Entry requirements for Flinders University are similar to those of the University of South Australia.

5 The South Australian state education provider is now DETE, the Department of Education, Training and Employment.

6 Twelve semester units is the basic requirement. Some students are able to choose to study more units, as used to occur at GHS, and at some schools an extra unit is timetabled for all students to enable their students to experience some additional areas which are thought important, such as Vocational Education, and study skills.

7 Many schools use line timetables, and each line is allocated an equal amount of lesson time per week, or per the number of days taken for each round of the timetable if it was a period other than a week.

8 IRL, to quote from the 'Course Offerings 1996' handbook, 'is a program designed to extend Year 10 students with gifts or talents. The programme allows students some time to carry out a detailed study in an area where they have a strong interest. It gives them an opportunity to develop their researching and organisational skills and puts a strong emphasis on self reliance.' A few students each year put together successful submissions, and find a teacher willing to supervise their project.

9 The size of the year 8 classes was highlighted for me by the note in my research journal about discussion with the teacher of the year 8 English teacher who talked to me before I began observations, about where I would sit in the classroom. This detail needed to be negotiated as the class was very large for the size of the classroom and the amount of furniture provided. I noted, "We decided that for this class the most appropriate positions for me [to sit] would be either in a

spare seat which was often positioned at the front of the class opposite the teacher's desk, the alternative being to carry in a spare chair from the corridor to position at the back of the room by the door when the whole class had entered the room. I used each of these positions at various times." In 1996 when observing a year 8 technical studies class the teacher was finding safe supervision of the large junior classes he was being asked to take extremely difficult, particularly when the students were using power tools, and in a class with at least one ADD student.

10 This form of the GHS Curriculum Guarantee was published 21/6/95.

11 This was true at the time of our conversation. Since then a student who transferred to the school for years 11 and 12 has done so. This student came originally from a community school (R-12) where the agricultural science teacher worked with all primary level classes in the school, as well as taking the secondary classes for agricultural science.

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