



Distance is no obstacle

Changing times in distance education

Nearly one hundred years ago, remote Tasmanian children received their school lessons delivered by horse-drawn mail. Today these children receive their lessons in real-time via the digital superhighway.

In 1919 a correspondence school was set up by Miss Hettie Wellard to meet the educational needs of children who lived outside a radius of three miles from an existing school. Today Distance Education Tasmania uses multimedia technology and personal contact to educate approximately 430 students a year from kindergarten to Year 10 who, for various reasons, are unable to physically attend school. The school's official criteria for enrolment includes students who may be geographically isolated, have a diagnosed medical condition, are travelling away from home, or have an inability to work within a classroom.

Principal Lyn Dunn says that within these categories there are enormous variations in personal circumstances. These include children who are currently experiencing mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, or agoraphobia; children who are unable to cope in a classroom setting; those struggling to deal with the death of a parent or their parents' separation; and students who are patients in either of Tasmania's two major public hospitals. A number of students may also be travelling with their families on extended holidays or have parents who are itinerant workers and need to travel regularly.

Lyn acknowledges that the challenges of running such a school are very complex. "We require very skilled teachers to meet the diverse needs of our students. For example, a child attending our school due to geographical isolation has very different needs to an adolescent suffering from a bipolar disorder – and so we strive for a diverse and rich curriculum. We try to be flexible and imaginative. We want every child to feel a strong sense of identification and belonging with their school and we place a huge emphasis on respectful personal relationships," Lyn said.

Connecting teachers with students

The school employs a variety of communication methods such as teaching online in real time, regular phone calls to the students, once-a-term home visits and face-to-face get-togethers for the students and parents.

The school connects with the children and their families in as many ways as possible and stresses that getting to know the families and engaging the parents are absolutely crucial to the children's wellbeing and educational outcomes. "The parent's role is incredibly important. It is almost impossible for a pre-literate child to operate in this environment without their parent's assistance. A close relationship almost always occurs with the parent, due to our insistence on consistent close contact and communication. Almost without exception, the parents step up to the task of ensuring their children do what is expected of them," Lyn said.

The school has embraced a software program, CENTRA, which reproduces a classroom environment. The teacher sits with a headset and whiteboard in front of a computer which has a camera and the necessary software. The children can all look at the same whiteboard at the same time and respond in real time, communicating essentially as if in a real classroom with their teacher and peers. Teachers also employ this method to deliver one-to-one tuition with each child at various times.

Challenging common perceptions of distance education

The criteria for enrolment suggest that KidsMatter would be an ideal program to be taken up by the school and the teaching of *Social and Emotional Learning* may be even more challenging in an environment that is more "virtual" than face-to-face.

The school confidently challenges these perceptions in a number of ways: “I think there is an assumption that children attain their important connections through relationships with other children at school. While this is true for many children, there are lots of other ways children can build significant relationships. Many of our children have rich learning lives outside of school with, for example, their siblings, cousins, neighbours, or people who live on their properties. We honour those learning opportunities and talk to their parents about how important they are. A relationship a child forms with a neighbour is just as important as a relationship they may have formed at school,” Lyn said.

For their work on the second KidsMatter component – *Social and Emotional Learning for Students*, the school has embraced You Can Do It! (K – 2) and Bounceback (K – 6) and has written several work units based on these programs. The school is strongly committed to producing explicit, high-quality, well-researched, colourful and inspiring resources. A publications team is on hand with the sole job of translating the text into easy-to-understand resources that are equally accessible by computer or by post. Teacher and KidsMatter Coordinator Lyn Cengia says the resources are the key to overcoming the lack of face-to-face contact. “The resources are very specifically written. When developing the resources, we need to think in the same way as the child receiving the resources and the parents helping the child would think. We need to think how the child will read the resources as we don’t get the immediate face-to-face reaction from them. We also give very clear instructions in the units of work of what is required of the child for that unit,” Lyn said.

For example, the children in Kindergarten to Year 2 explore social and emotional learning through the program I can do it! Education. Five puppet characters are introduced in this resource in the form of colourful photographic images representing different skills: Gabby Get Along; Oscar Organisation; Connie Confidence; Ricky Resilience; and Pete Persistence. Through these puppets the children explore scenarios about being cooperative and friendly towards others, setting goals and being organised, being positive about their own abilities, persevering at tasks and coping with setbacks.

Each child also looks at the unit of work with their teacher in a one-to-one interaction. This is done either via CENTRA or on the phone. “These sessions can be great learning opportunities. We give the child our full attention and they don’t have the usual distractions associated with being in a classroom,” Lyn Cengia said.

A home visit conducted each term enables the teacher to reinforce and enrich their relationship with the child and the family. “In our home visits we have the opportunity to raise issues with the children in a gentle way. We know the children well so we might say ‘*You don’t sound happy today*’ as a way of starting a conversation in a more sensitive area,” Lyn said.

Practising social and emotional skills

Mindful that connecting with other children and practising social and emotional skills are an important part of learning, the school creates many opportunities for the children to ‘meet’. The school has an online café – a chat room where the children can talk. “The café is comparative to a school canteen environment so we ensure that a teacher supervises the interactions,” Lyn Dunn said.

Being comfortable with digital communications, the children also establish their own connections outside of class time. This can be done via an online school network, through personal emails or phone calls. Some of the relationships formed through computer contact have led to sleep-overs and other get-togethers. Some travelling students have even caught up with other families while on the road. “KidsMatter has helped us to become more aware of the importance of opening this stuff up. We cannot assume that children have coping skills, reflective skills and they know emotions; KidsMatter has enabled us to take things out of the everyone-should-know-this basket and turn it into let’s-have-another-look-at-this,” Lyn Dunn said.

Distance Education Tasmania’s innovative teaching methods and modes of connection are proving that distance is no longer an obstacle to a child’s education and wellbeing, and that living a long way from a main road with a slow horse will never again be accepted as a valid excuse for late homework as it was in 1922.



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