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FLAGSTONE CREEK SCHOOL PROJECT

At the beginning of the 2008 school year, the staff and students of Flagstone Creek State School teamed up with academics from the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) to research their school and community.

By Dr. **Shelley Kinash**

Madison Hoffman, a Year 7 student, explained that it all began when Dr. Shelley Kinash, a visiting academic to USQ from Canada, and her husband, enrolled their two children, Kirsten, Year 5, and Josh, Year 3, into the school. "They started asking us questions about our school and the Flagstone Creek community, which made us realize that we did not really know much. Yet we wanted to know, and we should know, because we are living right in it."

Flagstone Creek State School opened in 1886 in the western end of the Lockyer Valley. There are currently thirty-two enrolled children. Thirteen children are in a mixed-age class from Prep through Year 4, and nineteen are in Year 5 through 7. When asked to name the best characteristics of their school, all of the children stated that they like the small, country atmosphere with lots of sports fields. This setting gave the children a rich place to begin their research.

Academics from USQ's Faculty of Education are using this project to educate pre- and in-service teachers about transformative schooling.

In mixed-age teams of eight, the students named their groups, wrote their own research questions, planned how they were going to collect their data, and decided how they would then share their findings with the public. It became evident that more adults would be required to support the children's learning process. USQ Faculty of Education academics, Dr. Karen Noble, Dr. Robyn Henderson and Honours student, Ms. Michelle Hoffman, were invited in as participant researchers.

The first group called themselves the Funky Phenos, playing on the word phenomenology, which is a research method they were learning. They decided to research the first crossing of Gorman's Gap.

The entrance to Gorman's Gap, just down the road from the school, is one of the bus route stops. Gorman's Gap is a significant historic site. The children were told that it was the first gazetted Australian road. It was the first crossing from the Lockyer Valley up the range to what is now called Drayton. Even though this site is so historically significant and close to the school, only one of the thirty-two students had ever been there. Mr. David Prestridge, who has been the school principal for over twenty years, was pleased that the students' initiative generated the opportunity to visit the site. The children carried out historical research, wrote a script and planned costumes and props for a re-enactment of the first crossing.

More community members were required and invited. Cr. Dave Neuendorf, the head of the committee for the revitalization of Gorman's Gap, led the children on an entire-school excursion to hike the road. Mr. Allan Langdon, Principal Advisor, Educational Services in the Toowoomba District of Education Queensland, joined the excursion to support the children's research. The Funky Phenos performed their re-enactment of the first crossing along the trail. A team of four videographers from USQ Media Services, and Mr. Stan Kinash, were there to direct, professionally film and help the children produce a movie. Mr. Neuendorf is advertising the children's movie to be included on local websites for public education. Whereas school children are usually the recipients of information, these children are generating knowledge for their community and beyond.

Again building on the research method of phenomenology, another group called themselves the Phenomenomenologists. They decided to study the stories of Flagstone Creek. They planned and advertised a Tea and Talk. Twenty members of the community spent a half-day at the school, to be interviewed by the children, enjoy some refreshments and connect with people they had not seen for a long time. The visitors included numerous grandparents, some of whom had graduated from the school sixty years prior. The children were honoured to be the first to record some of the stories that would have otherwise slipped away and been forgotten. Using Blackcat Spider software, the children

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produced their own website to publicly share these stories. Their website will be linked to the Flagstone Creek State School website, http://flagcreess.eq.edu.au

The next group chose to call themselves the Wildlife Water Warriors in keeping with their chosen research. They posed the question, what is the impact of drought and flood on local wild and domestic animals. These children demonstrated their connection to their natural environment and a commitment to social action. Their advertisement for experts in this research brought USQ Honours student, Ms. Nicole Mead, who demonstrated a device for measuring household water usage. The ad was also seen by Ms. Kay Montgomery, Science and Education Coordinator for SEQ Catchments. She spent a day and a half with the children. She taught them how to read aerial maps marking water access, how to make plaster casts of footprints to determine which animals were visiting local waterholes, and how to use all of their senses in their research.

She led them on an excursion down to the drought-impacted Flagstone Creek, where the children examined the weir and collected flora and fauna artefacts. The children used software called Podium, to help them produce a short educational podcast. Podcasts allow portable learning, because they can be easily downloaded from the Internet and played on personal MP3 players.

The final group called themselves the Slippery Sliders. They took on the task of documenting the entire project through producing a PowerPoint slide show. This group is also taking the lead in planning a final party, where all of the project stakeholders and the entire Flagstone Creek community will be invited to share in the screening of the research outcomes.

There are numerous reasons why this research project is significant.

This project is the first of its kind in many ways, and should be used as the inspiration for other innovative teaching and learning initiatives. Academics from USQ's Faculty of Education are using this project to educate pre- and in-service teachers about transformative schooling. This research project demonstrates that children can and should be trusted to plan and direct their own learning. The children found it motivating to pursue their own questions and their own plans for researching the answers. Mrs. Caroline Evans, one of the Prep to Year 4 teachers, explained that in order for this project to work, she needed to let go of her need for structure and curricular control. While this transition was initially challenging, she feels that the positive impact on the students and their learning outcomes is worth the effort. Year 4 student, James Scanlan, shared how this project proves what students of small, rural schools can accomplish.

The research also demonstrates that educational technologies have a positive impact on learning outcomes, when used within student research. Children ranging in age from five through twelve worked together in this research. The older children reinforced their leadership skills, and the younger children ensured that the project remained hands-on and used all of their senses. Finally, this research virtually demolished school walls, making teaching and learning a community project. Members from all facets of the community collaborated to support learning. Mr. Andrew Brassington, long-term resident of Flagstone Creek, commended the Flagstone Creek State School research project for bringing together children and seniors for the education of the whole community. ■

Dr. Shelley Kinash is an Academic in Higher Education Teaching and Learning Services at Bond University. She was previously employed in the Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland and in Educational Technology at the University of Calgary in Canada.
Dr. Kinash passionately grounds her teaching and learning in an inquiry-based pedagogical stance through infused technologies.
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