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Everyday Life in Distance Education: One family's home schooling experience

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This article offers a narrative portrait of one family enrolled in a school of distance education in Queensland, Australia. Most of the families own or manage sheep and/or beef grazing properties, and their children receive their education by correspondence papers and daily UHF radio lessons. The students complete their school work at home with a home tutor, who is most often the mother, with support and assistance provided by the school of distance education's teaching and support staff. As part of a larger inquiry focused on what home schooling is like as a component of living and working on sheep or cattle properties, and as but one part of the families' everyday lives, the portrait includes biographical information about Louise Michaelson as home tutor, narrative sketches of her children Thomas and Timothy, and descriptive discussions of daily routines both within and outside of the schoolrooms used for the distance education programs.

Introducing the Inquiry

In July 2004, I entered into an inquiry relationship with three families enrolled in a "school of distance education"[1] in Queensland, Australia. The primary and secondary school community lives within an area over 300,000 square kilometres. At the school of distance education, geography makes home schooling a forced choice for the majority of families because they own or manage sheep and/or beef grazing properties that are situated in isolated areas of Queensland. The families include approximately 200 children who receive their education by correspondence papers and, during the period of the data collection, daily UHF radio lessons. The students complete their school work at home with a home tutor, who is most often the mother, with support and assistance provided by the school of distance education's teaching and support staff.

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Much of the research on distance education in Australia has been concerned with innovations in technology or curriculum. New curricula tend to be planned on the basis of inference and philosophical frameworks external to the distance education families. The nature of the curricula being delivered by new technologies tends not to be questioned. Research has focused on achievement outcomes in asking questions about the effectiveness of the technology used and the particular curricula delivered by distance modes (Boylan, Wallace, & Richmond, 2000; Leadbetter, 1998; Louden & Rivalland, 1995; Vivian, 1986). Studying inputs and outputs in this way treats families and children receiving distance education as a "black box" (Canning, 1992; Harley, 1985).

Although there are many accounts of distance education experiences by teachers and outside researchers, there has been little inquiry into the families' day-to-day experiences of teaching and learning at home and their perspectives on distance education. Some attention has been given to home tutors—their roles, effectiveness, and professional development. Overall, the trend in most reports reveals a tendency to treat home tutors' teaching skills and practices as deficient and to not value their knowledge and experience. Home tutors tend to be viewed by researchers and school of distance education staff as merely curriculum technicians (Boylan, 1996; Boylan & Wallace, 1999). Although the complex and varied roles of home tutors in a distance education context are acknowledged, research has focused on their supervision and relational skills in school learning activities and on how to "train" home tutors to successfully implement the curriculum.

Previous distance education research has taken little account of what more holistically transpires in the conduct of distance education in families' homes. In the research reported here, I have conducted qualitative case studies of the distance education experience of the Michaelson, Mitchell, and Carson families with an intent to learn how the mothers as home tutors and their children experience distance education and how it is that they have come to experience it in that way. To attend to the gap in the research literature, the data collection activities in this inquiry focused on generating understanding and insight into how families can experience distance education generally before specific suggestions about curriculum or teaching and learning practices can more usefully be made to curriculum planners or to staff working at schools of distance education.

Collecting and Analysing the Data

Recognizing that the families' schoolrooms were part of their sheep and/or cattle properties, I studied the participants' everyday lives in both their schoolrooms and on their properties. Over a period of 5 months, I made 3-day monthly visits to each family. The data collection activities included making observations, conducting formal interviews, having informal conversations, taking field notes, and having participants take photographs of their everyday lives. The photographs were used to support discussion in interviews. The home tutors also wrote in dialogue journals during that time.

As a first level of analysis, I crafted a descriptive narrative portrait of each family and daily life on the family's property and in its schoolroom. According to the Latin root, a portrait seeks to reveal, expose, and draw forth its subject (Mergendoller, 1989). In writing the portraits, it was my intention "to develop vicarious experiences for the readers, to give them a sense of *being there*" (Stake, 1998, p. 63).

To craft the narrative portraits I drew from my interview transcripts, field notes, and dialogue journals. These data had already been produced or coded through the interpretive lens of "place" (Ashcroft, 2001; Eyles, 1989). In Ashcroft's discussion, place is what results or evolves from the way people spend their time in a location and the identities of the inhabitants affect their mode of inhabitation. Ashcroft (2001) suggests that the way people inhabit a place is bound up with their culture and identity. In Eyles' (1989) argument, place is treated as the source of structures that constrain the way people can inhabit or can shape everyday lives. In discussing the everyday life that evolves in a place, Eyles emphasizes the significance of structural formations—rules, resources, and available relationships with individuals, ideas, and institutions—in limiting the everyday lives that are possible in a place. People's everyday lives—all of their routine activities and interactions—are the backdrop of meaning for their interpretations of events and actions and the structural formations of place enable or constrain the nature of everyday life. Eyles notes that as everyday life begins to take shape, it becomes a structure that further limits the everyday lives that people can shape for themselves. In so far as the structural formations of place limit people's actions in everyday life, they also limit the identities that can be created. Eyles also notes that it is through people's actions in everyday life that they build, maintain, and reconstruct the very definitions, roles, values, and motivations that shape their actions and ways of seeing in the world. In other words, people create or recreate their identities through their actions in everyday life. Eyles' ideas about the relationships among the structural formations of place, everyday life, and identity together with Ashcroft's ideas about the significance of the identities inhabitants bring with them to a place, provided a theoretical framework for the inquiry.

These ideas about place were helpful for discerning the nature of the school learning places and how they had been evolving in the lives of each of the three families. During observation and coding, my attention was focused on how the home tutors and children experienced everyday life in the schoolrooms and on how, within the schoolrooms, the resources, rules, routines, relationships, and identities of inhabitants contributed to the everyday life that evolved. I drew from, and organized, these data in an effort to present both coherent portrayals of everyday life in the schoolrooms and on the properties as well as a sense of the identities—values, motivations, roles, ways of seeing and acting—of the home tutors and children. My intention in writing the narrative portraits was to be descriptive. Working from all of my data to write the portraits was an opportunity for me to pull together much of the material from 5 months of data collection into a semblance of structure.

The forms of data collection and narrative analysis used in this research produced a sense of the families' everyday lives outside of the schoolroom which helps one

appreciate how they may experience everyday life within the schoolroom. Different aspects of this research have been disseminated for varying purposes. For example, I examined all of the research data to address three questions:

(a) How did the mothers experience being home tutors?
(b) How did the children experience the places of their everyday lives both in the schoolroom and on their properties?
(c) How did everyday life in the schoolrooms evolve as it did?

The findings regarding all three families have been submitted to diverse journals and audiences. Additional papers have discussed the conceptual framework; provided an in-depth literature review; and reported on the trials and tribulations of methodology not commonly used, or used at all, in research about primary and secondary distance education programs in Australia. The purpose of this article is to provide a holistic view of the everyday lives of the members of one of the families. Due to space constraints, only one of the three family portraits is included—biographical information about Louise Michaelson as home tutor, narrative sketches of her children Thomas and Timothy, and descriptive discussions of daily routines both within and outside of the schoolroom used for the distance education program. Louise's reflections and perspectives are in the foreground of these portraits.

The Michaelson Family

Louise and Daniel Michaelson live with their two sons, Thomas and Timothy, on a cattle property in Western Queensland. Louise has been home educating the boys for 5 years. The property the family manages and calls "home" is both geographically and climactically dissimilar from the North American small town where Louise spent her childhood with her parents and older brother and sister.

About Louise

Louise has fond memories of her childhood, including many family experiences in the outdoors among nature. During the regular routine of the school year, Louise's mother worked at home and her father departed for his place of employment as she and her siblings were waking. On most evenings, the family would have dinner together before her father was required to leave again for meetings. The location of the family's yearly vacation did not matter to Louise as much as the highlight of spending time with her father away from his work commitments. She speaks fondly of the family's pop-up trailer and the learning she gained from her father, for example, as they walked together discussing the fauna and flora, or used the axe and built campfires. The family also spent their holidays playing baseball, catch, and frisbee and swimming in the lake.

In Years 1–4 Louise participated in a traditional classroom education, with one educator teaching all of the subject areas, except for art and music which were taught by specialist teachers. In the final 2 years of elementary school, Louise

attended a non-traditional school which was based on an open-area approach to teaching and learning. Her Years 5 and 6 classes consisted of approximately 150 students in a large space divided by moveable partitions. Louise enjoyed being able to see all of her friends coming and going as they used the art room down one end of the room, and the library at the other. Louise had several educators in these year levels teaching mathematics, language arts, social studies, science, art, and music. A bell would ring several times throughout the school day to signal it was time for the children to move to a different part of the classroom space for a change in subject and teacher.

The physical space of many of the classrooms Louise spent time in consisted of queues of shelves under the windows, rows of windows in every classroom, a blackboard at the opposite end to the windows, and individual desks in straight lines. The walls were covered with instructional posters and charts such as alphabet posters in the early years; and maps and pictures related to social studies, and artwork in the upper year levels.

Her relationship with her teachers was not a close connection because, as Louise described, she was a quiet student who would not choose to get involved with them: "I just did what I was told to do. I never stood out" (L. Michaelson, personal communication, July 27, 2004). In these classes, students were divided in three ability levels for mathematics and language arts. Louise spoke of this positively:

> … we were divided into three groups—middle, lower, and higher—so you were put into your ability rather than being stuck in the general class so you weren't struggling. There wasn't a teacher standing there saying, "You can do that, you know how to do that, now do it." You were in with kids who were the same level so you weren't being left behind and pushed by any of them. (L. Michaelson, personal communication, July 27, 2004)

As a student, Louise generally felt that she had few rights and suggested that it was the students' "right" to sit quietly and do their school work. While saying this, Louise remembers always being respected and that students who required alternative pedagogical programs were well supported by other teachers in the district. She did not question the authority of the teacher in expecting the students' compliance and, on the rare occasions students did, they were sent to the principal's office. As a student, Louise had the responsibility to be on time for school, to be ready with the right equipment and books, and to have her homework completed. Other expectations at school were that muddy footwear would be replaced by clean footwear indoors, and that students would contribute to the general classroom discussion.

Louise's experience of schooling changed when she reached high school. The teachers were stricter and less open to "joking" or "fun." Specifically, Louise recalls the science subject teachers as being more serious and describes these classes as one aspect of her educational experience that she would have liked to change.

Louise attended college following high school and completed a program in Recreation Management, providing her with the skills and knowledge to operate sports programs, fitness programs, swimming pools, and ice rinks in towns and cities. Louise had never envisaged working with children, even though her recreational

training required developing child-oriented programs. By chance, a building she was working in had a day care centre with a job opening and Louise applied for the job because it was convenient and provided extra income. Louise speaks fondly of being with the children in the day care centre but questions her role as a carer or educator:

> I really enjoyed being with the kids. I wish now that I had known what I know now about education and teaching. I could have done so much more with them. As it was, we simply played. We didn't work on much education and I think that we could have. They would have benefited. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004)

Louise then backpacked around Australia and took a 3-month job on a property when she met Daniel, her future husband. Daniel had accepted contract work on the property, helping with the shearing at the time Louise was there. The couple moved back and forth, living together in both Australia and North America. Employment opportunities for Daniel and the choice of a particular lifestyle brought them to live permanently in Queensland 5 or 6 years later. "It was the lifestyle as opposed to the country. If you can find us a similar lifestyle in a greater climate, we'll be there" (L. Michaelson, personal interview, July 27, 2004). Living on a property is fitting for Louise as she dislikes cities and crowds. It also suits her enjoyment in spending time with a small group of friends as opposed to larger numbers of people. She also loves animals and travelling.

Louise's next role working with children would involve educating her own two boys through a school of distance education program. Daniel and Louise knew they would enrol their children in this educational program because they had chosen to live and work on an isolated property over 150 kilometres from the closest primary school.

About Thomas and Timothy

Thomas (8 years) and Timothy (7 years) were born 18 months apart and spend much of their spare time playing outdoors together. Although their personalities, work habits, thinking, and interests can be very different, or "opposite" as described by their mother, the boys do share common interests in trampolining, swimming, riding their bikes, and particular choices of movies, audio books, and children's literature. They also share enjoyment in playing football and watching the game on television on the weekends.

Both siblings enjoy mustering[2] with their dad. Thomas and Timothy also enjoy putting out the feed for the cattle with their dad or the jackaroo,[3] and other kinds of property work.

Thomas began his schooling experience anxiously. For example, he spent many evenings worrying about school the next day, and saying that he didn't want to go. Louise recalls Thomas expressing negative feelings toward the schoolroom experience, directly stating that he didn't like school or didn't like particular activities associated with school. Five years later he continues to resist the beginning of each school day and some of the activities the curriculum requires him to complete,

although he generally participates in the formal school work. Over time, Thomas has become increasingly cooperative. Louise is grateful that her son didn't give up and is continually learning and achieving success.

While Louise describes her two sons as "totally different," Timothy is beginning to demonstrate some of the behaviours and attitudes to formal schooling which are characteristic of Thomas. Timothy's growing resistance to school appears to be associated with feelings of boredom with aspects of the curriculum which are not interesting him or challenging him. Louise struggles to ensure that Timothy continues his love of learning, in particular his enjoyment of mathematics, by trying to keep him challenged by it. Thomas' overt dislike for school learning activities seems to discourage him from sharing what "school knowledge" he knows and what "school skills" he is capable of. Louise is conscious of the need for Thomas to discuss orally and work in a hands-on way with concepts, information, or stories as he experiences difficulty in understanding what he has read.

Timothy is more expressive than Thomas and enjoys sharing his excitement about activities or events he has been involved in. This is evident during his on-air lessons also as he often shares news with his teacher and peers.

Thomas is of great assistance around the house, doing regular chores and other jobs. He also has been given and has accepted more responsibilities than his younger sibling. These include, for example, learning to drive the four-wheel drive, mowing the lawn, assisting in the cattle yards, and independently using a pocket knife. Timothy is excited about learning new factual information and also uses his extensive imagination to create play situations by himself. Like his older brother, Timothy enjoys being active. Thomas is interested in sports and is good at them. Timothy also enjoys sports but requires time and effort to practice the skills. In fact, Timothy can be seen kicking a ball for hours by himself, whereas Thomas would choose not to play football if no one else is playing with him. Louise finds her two sons complement each other, "It's good because they pull the one that's weak out. Thomas gets Timothy out there running around and Timothy gets Thomas imagining things where he normally wouldn't sit and play and imagine" (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004).

The Schoolroom

The schoolroom is a carpeted, small, single building situated approximately 50 metres from the family's home. Not only does the enclosed veranda on one side of the building provide extra space, but its wooden floors and gauzed-in sides provide warmth from the sun in the winter and shelter from the flies in the summer. During a few months of each year, finches build nests in one corner of the veranda's roof to hatch their eggs. The baby finches stay there and the Michaelson's observe them learning to fly.

Two louvered windows in the main building provide light and fresh air all year round. The windows are difficult to see out of and Louise prefers the boys not to sit in front of them because the rain comes in at a particular angle.

The walls of the schoolroom are covered with instructional posters and charts. Louise chooses the materials to be put on the walls and speaks of the printed materials as decoration and would like more if there was the wall space. The aesthetic appeal of the instructional posters and charts is both for the boys and for Louise. Thomas and Timothy tend to use the letter chart for guidance and to ask Louise for assistance rather than looking at the wall and finding the pictorial assistance or clues they need.

Louise offers Thomas and Timothy the choice of where they would like to situate their desks; however, the choice is limited due to the numerous power cords requiring power points. The computer remains in the same location because of the cords coming into the schoolroom from the satellite dish. Also, all power points are located in the one corner to save running cords across walls and under floors. All the technology in the one corner of the schoolroom has created some obstacles which Louise has overcome. With only an air cooler in the schoolroom, Louise needs to turn it on early enough so the computer remains cool for the morning session of their school day. The family avoids using the computer later in the day. Now that Thomas and Timothy are older, they participate in on-air lessons by themselves and Louise works with whoever is not on-air for 30 minutes of individual time. Louise does keep the volume of the radio at a level she can still hear to monitor her sons' participation in, and understanding of, the lesson. The tape recorder has earphones which the boys find uncomfortable so Louise asks them to close the door and to turn the volume down on the tape they are listening to. Louise, Thomas, and Timothy will all join in on the activity if it's a song that they can all sing, dance, or move to.

Louise is also attentive to the positions of the boys' desks in terms of behaviour management, "… having to squish them together so they are interfering with each other all the time … Timothy's chatter, constantly talking. It's very difficult telling him to be quiet. Not much you can do about it, with his chattering" (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004). Louise has found the increase of computer work has raised the level of distraction in the schoolroom as two forms of communication and learning technology are situated together and sometimes both boys require the use of the radio or the computer at the same time. Thomas' desk location helps him concentrate on his own school work as he cannot view the computer on the other side of the opened schoolroom door. He also has a wall in front and on his left side. Louise is constantly on the move from the boys' desks inside or the two desks on the veranda. There are times when she may sit, for example, during morning notices or a longer discussion with either of the boys about a topic in their curriculum papers—however, Louise rarely sits in her chair or at her desk.

Louise speaks of the schoolroom as small and dreams of an expansion or new space which has a room for the radio and computer that is separate from the desk space where Thomas and Timothy sit and work. Louise cannot envisage the schoolroom changing in the near future, yet remains appreciative that it is situated in a separate building from the house:

> It's good, if it had been in the house it would have been unworkable for Thomas, [as] there would have been too many interruptions. He needs that away, separate building. The phone can't interrupt us unless it's a school call because generally only the school's got that number. A couple of other people do and they only phone in emergencies. It's good, being active outdoor children, we spend a lot of time out of the schoolroom like sitting on the veranda … they work so much better working out as opposed to in, except in the summer when you've got the cooler on. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, July 27, 2004)

Beginning Experiences of Distance Education

In her first job in Australia Louise worked with men and became accustomed to their interests and topics of conversation. At parties, she found herself having nothing in common with the women and would rather talk to the men. Since beginning her role as a home tutor, Louise reflects:

> Now that you're in this situation you need a friend you can call every now and then and it helps if they are in the same age level so you can say "how did you go with this activity or how did you do that?" I've got more friends and you're communicating more. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004)

As preparation for her role as home tutor and at the beginning of the first year of preschool with Thomas, Louise constantly phoned another parent. She found a friend and confidant in a home tutor who had several children, many years of experience with home schooling, and who was active in the school community. Louise knew that one of the home tutor's children demonstrated the same reluctance to attend school as Thomas. Even though this parent employed a governess, Louise felt that she understood the behaviours Thomas was demonstrating. Louise turned to her friend for answers about ideas for responding to those behaviours. Louise also learned through her friend about some of the community support roles, such as area representatives and sports representatives whom she could contact for information as she was not familiar with the routines and expectations related to school-organized events.

Louise acknowledges that preschool was a less demanding and stressful experience for her because the thematic kits were easy to follow and implement, and the school of distance education teachers guided Louise by giving feedback on the learning opportunities she was providing for Thomas. However, Louise admits that even though she and Daniel knew Thomas had a difficult temperament, she did not anticipate the school learning process would be so hard: "We'll try and if it doesn't work then we'll have to get somebody sort of thing … it's more, not necessarily the job that's hard but the child is hard; his lack of interest, him doing it" (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004). It was not until Louise communicated more with other home tutors that she realized that other tutors had days as bad as those she had with Thomas. The early days with distance education were not positive for Louise and she existed in the schoolroom on a day-to-day basis. As she describes further: "Stressful, probably because I started with Thomas and he hates it. Every day was a battle, every day was an argument, and every day was a push. There

wasn't a lot he did enjoy in it. It was just a real struggle" (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004). Through communication with other families enrolled in distance education, she slowly came to realize that if she was having a bad day then she also knew there were a hundred other people out there who were possibly also having a similar experience. For Louise, this understanding now provides her with a sense of belonging to the school community as, "You feel much more involved if you know what is happening" (L. Michaelson, personal interview, September 6, 2004). Louise is now a vice-president of a community division of a state-wide organization helping families who are living in small rural communities. Furthermore, Louise's learning experiences are reflected in how she assists new families. For example, last year as area representative, Louise ensured she phoned all the new home tutors before the first cluster and before the first sports skills day to ensure that they were aware of what pre-planning could be involved, what could be expected, and what kinds of things could happen.

Five years later, Louise's teaching and learning with Thomas has become more positive as a result of consistent expectations from her and Daniel, and the establishment of a consistent routine:

> … school is the priority here, there is no excuse to go and do anything else until school is done and they know that. It's been drilled into them that nothing comes ahead of school and they just know they have to get in and get it done. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004)

A Portrait of Everyday Life

The Michaelson's weekdays begin with Daniel rising and leaving for work before the heat of the day makes its presence known. Louise enjoys a morning walk and finishes some chores around the house before crossing through the house yard and over to the schoolroom a few minutes before 8.00 a.m. On her morning walk with the dogs, Louise wonders about the day ahead as she notices an s-bend in the road:

> When I see it, I think this is what today is going to be, twisted, it goes down into a creek as well, it's going to twist and turn and go up and down. You know where the end is but you've got to get there and don't know what is along the way. That's just every day. You don't know how they are going to come into school. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, October 18, 2004)

The start of the school day for Louise, Thomas, and Timothy begins with the broadcast of the school of distance education's morning notices. Once per week the mailman arrives in a four-wheel drive and stops outside the schoolroom. Louise greets him as he stays in the car. The boys expect their weekly candy treat before the mailman continues his drive to other families in the district. Thomas and Timothy are familiar with their responsibilities and the routines in the schoolroom. However, they need reminding, encouraging, and coercing in order to fulfil and follow these. While Louise listens to morning notices, the boys have a choice of completing a puzzle, reading a book, or beginning their first session of language arts (LAC 1).[4] The time following morning notices is hurried for Timothy as he continues with

journal writing or the LAC curriculum activities. Attention is given to the time as it draws near to 9.00 a.m. when his teacher calls on the telephone for reading. As soon as the telephone produces sound, Louise and Thomas call "Timothy, telephone reading." He participates in his on-air lesson, responding to questions but mainly calling in to share a comment or his experiences. While Louise chooses to leave the boys to participate in on-air lessons, she listens and monitors their attention. The static in the radio reception makes hearing all of their peers impossible on most days and it is tempting for Thomas and Timothy to play with any objects close by. Timothy enjoys on-air lessons, especially when his class does science and art. Actually, any time that he can do art and science throughout the school day is enjoyable for Timothy. He appreciates Louise's help during the on-air lessons as her participation makes these activities more memorable and he is excited by the idea of telephone lessons beginning as the reception will be a lot clearer and static-free.

While Timothy is working with his school of distance education teacher, Thomas reluctantly continues with spelling, grammar, or journal writing. The family's morning "smoko"[5] is at 9.30 a.m. Smoko fits into the schedule for on-air lessons set by the school. Therefore, Timothy works for another 15 minutes following his telephone reading session.

If either of the boys finishes what Louise believes they should, they can go for smoko without her and their sibling. This is also the case at the end of the school day. After a 30-minute break, they race back to the schoolroom for Timothy's on-air lesson. While they are physically removed from the schoolroom, Louise often discusses things with the boys about what needs to be done when they return, or spends smoko time completing an added assignment given by the school of distance education teacher during the on-air lessons.

The school day has many changes of pace for Thomas and he requires time for adjustment between activities. For example, following his on-air lesson at 11.00 a.m., he wanders around and fiddles with various objects before settling into the mathematics work. During the on-air lesson, Thomas' teacher keeps him on task by calling him in if he hasn't contributed or responded to each discussion or activity.

It is a busy and longer session after the morning break as mathematics and the second session of language arts (LAC 2)[6] need to be finished before having lunch and finishing school for the day. Both Thomas and Timothy know they are really good at mathematics but Timothy is not enjoying it at the moment. If he could change an aspect of his school day to make it better, he would not do mathematics and handwriting. Thomas would like to include more "fun" activities at school like playing football.

Timothy talks while completing his work and is often asked to be quiet by Thomas or to concentrate on his work by Louise. Louise is attentive to the personal physical space Thomas prefers to have to complete his work. Both the inside of the schoolroom and the veranda are used by Thomas and Timothy. Usually they choose where they would like to be to complete their school work and are moved only if they are verbally or physically annoying one another. If Thomas is being cooperative and productive, he will only ask Louise for assistance before he goes onto the next

activity and otherwise he works alone. Louise will sometimes write for Thomas when the focus is on his understanding and not his ability to construct sentences, for example. Thomas has also begun to ask if he can type rather than write some tasks. Sometimes he complains of activities requiring completion on the computer although he is quite confident in using the skills he has learned during his school computer lessons. For example, Thomas is asked by Louise to demonstrate processes to Timothy, such as sending an email to his teacher. Thomas enjoys listening to music and Louise allows this to be played if he is able to continue working well.

Louise walks between Thomas and Timothy quite continuously and rarely sits down. Much of Louise's interactions with the boys are conducted standing next to them as they sit. In the moments when both boys are working independently without requiring Louise's assistance or attention, Louise reviews the home tutor guides. She can remember most of the curriculum requirements and knows what each of her sons are required to do in each activity. Louise will check the home tutor guide further if she is introducing a new concept in science, mathematics, or social studies. This helps her to initiate a discussion and to understand what prior knowledge or skills the children have.

Louise raises her voice when she is frustrated with Thomas and Timothy's unwillingness to complete a task. She uses humour and sarcasm to motivate the boys. For example, when Thomas was unwilling to write in his journal, Louise suggested he write, "First I said I can't, then I said I can't, and then I sent a blank page to my teacher" (Green, 2004). Everyone in the schoolroom laughed. Louise also rewards the boys with a sticker for their sticker chart for entire sessions completed well and with little fuss. Another strategy to change the children's behaviour is to threaten them with not being able to do something after school, such as Thomas losing his bike or his privilege of using the house computer to play games. Louise's day in the schoolroom is spent multi-tasking, for example, listening to the radio while the boys are on-air and working with the son not on-air. She plans games to play with Thomas and Timothy as a break between the curriculum work or at the end of the school day. If both boys are playing, Louise adjusts the level of difficulty of the games. The games come from either the school library, from resources made by Louise from the curriculum packs, or an outdoor activity such as passing a ball and answering number facts.

Louise has never skipped an entire day of curriculum work, with any days missed caught up when Louise, Thomas, and Timothy were back in the schoolroom. Because of the sequencing of the curriculum activities, Louise believes it would be difficult to continue if one day was missed. The weekday routine is much the same each day in the schoolroom until formal school work is completed around 1.00 p.m. Timothy would like to finish every school day with art because now he only does it occasionally on Fridays or as a one-off project integrated into the curriculum papers. Thomas' favourite part of the school day is leaving in the afternoon.

After school, the family has lunch together before Louise completes the remainder of her household and garden chores. She makes a point of spending time with her

children in the late afternoon playing football and other outside games. Some days Thomas and Timothy spend the afternoon with their father mustering, on a lick run, or sorting cattle in the yards. Thomas dislikes returning to the schoolroom for his extra-curricular recorder and chess lessons two afternoons per week.

The boys' nightly chore is to feed the dogs and they will often help their mother with dinner. Before dinner is served, the boys take their showers. Their nightly story routine is to read a book to their mother or father and then have a book read to them.

On the weekends during the winter, one day is spent attending Thomas and Timothy's football match in a town 2 hours from the family's property. The family also enjoys going to community events such as the horse races and spending time with friends; all involving a substantial amount of travel time. Louise and Daniel discussed their commitment to all the driving as Thomas approached his preschool year. Louise shares their decision-making:

> If we start, like the sport, are we going to do all the extras that the school puts on, because you can't start them one year and then say to the kids that no it's too much this year we're not doing it. So that first year when they all came up we discussed it, did we want to commit to all that driving or were we just going to pull the kids. But with Thomas he so desperately needed the interaction that we just said yeah. We've brought them up out here; we've got to provide them with the socialization that's available for them. You hop in and you drive! (L. Michaelson, personal interview, July 27, 2004)

Louise admits that the driving becomes daunting in the cold winter months between May and September when sports and community events are mostly scheduled. Unlike in the hot summer months between November and March when the family stays home for 4–5 weeks at a time, the winter months often involve weekly trips to town. The school community and its associated events are another opportunity for socialization and other learning experiences for the Michaelson family. Louise ensures she attends so that Timothy and Thomas learn to interact with children their age and to listen to and take instructions from other adults:

> I'm not big on art so, they love their art so the only place they get it is at sports skills and minischool, or cultural camps, something provided by the school. I very much believe that just because they live out here doesn't mean that they have to be hillbillies, or country bumpkins. I think that if the opportunity is there then we've really got to provide it for them. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, July 27, 2004)

Most weekends, Daniel has work to do such as collecting cattle from the neighbours a 1 hour drive away. Generally, the family finds time for rest and relaxation. Louise invests at least 2 hours each weekend to each set of curricula, becoming familiar with the activities, equipment, and resources needed and the expectations outlined. Every now and then, Louise is required to spend time with one of the boys on the weekend to complete a school-related activity, usually a project or published genre. Working with only one of her children, Louise finds the task easier to finish. Thomas and Timothy also receive a Sunday phone call from their Boy Scouts' group leader in Brisbane.

Reflections on the Home Educating Experience

For Louise, teaching and learning with Timothy and Thomas in the family's schoolroom present continued challenges, rewards, and satisfaction. Louise has both good days and bad days in the schoolroom. She does find satisfaction in her teaching role, especially when Thomas or Timothy have grasped a new concept or become excited about something they are learning. A comment from the teacher, or an encouragement award given to one of the boys recognizing an achievement, is also rewarding for Louise. Louise expresses concern that she is never aware of what kind of job she is doing because she rarely has the opportunity to compare her children to others of the same age. She continually questions:

> … if they know enough, if you've taught them enough, if they are behind. It's really hard to judge where they are and therefore you never totally relax and say "We're going all right" cause you don't know if you're going all right. So you're constantly pushing and they say that distance education students get pushed harder for that fact. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004)

School-planned events can be an obstacle, depending where they fall in a unit; however, Louise ensures she plans ahead by completing extra school work each day or making use of each Friday. Extra assignments given by the school of distance education teachers during on-air lessons as "homework" also present Louise with the need to add that in to the regular work for that day. Louise describes poor radio reception as a very big obstacle for most of the year, which causes frustrations and moodiness among the three occupants in the schoolroom. It is hoped that the telephone lessons, which are to replace the daily UHF radio lessons, will make a difference simply for the fact that they will be able to hear the teacher and other students. Louise also struggles with not having adequate time and knowledge to plan extra work or adapt the current curriculum to meet Timothy's needs and interests. She is challenged by:

> … keeping Timothy going in maths and thinking that he is getting something out of it because I don't always know that he is. It's a bit of a challenge trying to keep the program up to him. I don't have the time. Putting the time that needs to go into it is really difficult, along with everything else. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004)

Louise brings many helpful attributes to her teaching role in the schoolroom. For example, patience (which, by the end of the year is a lot shorter than at the start of the year); flexibility to alter routines because of changes from the school; creativity in finding resources and supporting her children in art; organization, the ability to step back from the learning to encourage her children's ideas and own work, and understanding in seeing how the pieces all come together. Louise also brings a practical perspective to school learning:

> I'm a bit like Thomas—you do it and get it done, you do it day after day. I don't examine it, thinking what has it got me or what hasn't it got me, or what am I getting from it. You've got to keep learning, as soon as you stop learning you get very bored so it's very important to make sure you're learning a little bit to get more ideas and that you're

> teaching the kids the same concept, that it is important to learn. That they're learning and wanting to learn. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, August 17, 2004)

In addition to communicating with several other home tutors in the same year level, Louise also has the support of her husband. Daniel also believes that school comes first and respects the routine of the school day. On occasion, Daniel has asked for help, but only when it fits into the school schedule, otherwise it would be a difficult task for Thomas to return to the schoolroom.

Louise has also found the school of distance education teaching and support staff helpful to her in her home tutor role and always available and willing to be there for her. Louise feels comfortable communicating with staff about a wide range of topics such as concepts presented in the curriculum or asking for the list of resources they have borrowed from the library. She reflects that this is due to the message sent by teachers to parents—home tutors and students can phone in whenever they need, and not feel that they're interrupting anything. Many of the conversations Louise seeks from the school of distance education staff are about questions or concerns requiring an immediate response at the time of completing an activity. Louise commends the school of distance education for fostering good communication between families and school staff.

Louise appreciates morning notices and believes this time and space is important to foster community. She also believes that the Parents and Citizens' Association has a strong relationship with the school, both listening to each other's concerns and opinions: "I think that you have to have that for people to feel like they belong and for things to run smoothly" (L. Michaelson, personal interview, July 27, 2004).

School-organized events are another source of support for Louise. She places so much importance on attending the "cluster" days[7] that the family planned to return early from their September holiday so they could attend the cluster day before going home. Louise spent the cluster day with her children, drove 2 hours to get home that evening and then spent the following day washing, checking the gardens, and cleaning cupboards to put an entire car and trailer of food into them. On Sunday, Louise then travelled 40 kilometres to complete a full-day first aid course before beginning the week in the schoolroom with Thomas and Timothy the following day. Both of the boys enjoy cluster days and so does their mother, for different reasons:

> I tend to enjoy them because it's a chance to talk to the mothers, get new ideas, you discover that your child is not the only one who had this problem or didn't want to do that. It makes a big difference because you just don't see how other kids are doing and that's the one complaint that I find difficult with distance education is not being able to just compare, just have an idea, am I pushing them too hard, am I letting them slack off too much, where should they be to be average as such with the work. (L. Michaelson, personal interview, July 27, 2004)

Louise has developed a confidence in relation to the school, the operations, and what's happening each term due to her 5 years of experience. She would not change anything about the school of distance education's program, except to move it closer to where her family lives!

Discussion

I conceptualized and carried out this qualitative inquiry with the belief that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding, from the perspectives of the families enrolled in a school of distance education, offers the greatest promise of making contributions to the knowledge base and practice of distance education. It is beyond the limits of this article to detail recommendations for research and practice associated with schools of distance education in Australia that cater for families enrolled in primary and secondary education programs. What is to be highlighted is that I chose the Michaelson, Carson, and Mitchell families as participants in this research for their explanatory power (Scott & Usher, 1999); that is, for what I thought they could illustrate separately and together. The preceding narrative portrait of the Michaelson family, chosen from the three crafted from the data, is a first level of analysis. Writing about the Michaelson family separately should not be seen as offering a representative look at the families' experiences, but rather as an in-depth interpretive account highlighting the kinds of insights which can be generated from researching families' home schooling experiences as but one part of their everyday lives.

The narrative of the Michaelson family underscores the importance of understanding the mother's educational biography and the family's everyday lives on their properties and how these circumscribe the ways in which everyday life evolves in the schoolroom. Louise's experience of the home tutoring role reflects the ways in which each schoolroom is a part of the larger place of home and a property for caring for animals. She was motivated to complete the many routines attached to her multiple roles. In order to do so, certain limits or boundaries are set for work related to home tutoring. For example, by coming to know that Louise experienced the competing demands of either chores or more enjoyable pursuits, one can better understand how each day of the distance education programs became one more thing that had to be done. Furthermore, the distance education materials—a key resource in the schoolroom—largely set the tone and the pace of Louise's home tutoring activities with her children. The distance education materials, while providing a resource for the home tutor, failed to rescue school learning activities from becoming simply a chore for both Louise and her children. The women's own previous and current experiences did not help them to be more confident, flexible, or imaginative with the learning activities.

The narrative of the Michaelson family also draws attention to the importance of coming to know about the children's experiences and relationships in the schoolroom and how these were the same or different from their experiences and relationships in other places. For example, Thomas and Timothy had many places and activities they enjoyed within and outside of the family's property. These places supported the development of self-identity both by affording opportunities for them to try out predefined roles in conventional settings and by offering unprogrammed space (Chawla, 1992). The places of their everyday lives outside of the schoolroom supported meaningful relationships and opportunities for creative expression and exploration. The children experienced and enjoyed their mother in many roles and

moods outside of the schoolroom. Louise acknowledged that she did not take some of these more enjoyable aspects of herself into the schoolroom. Her more limited and less enjoyable forms of interaction with the children in the schoolroom, together with the routine approach to following the distance education materials meant that the school learning places that evolved lacked aspects of children's favourite places—opportunities for social affiliation, creative expression, and exploration (Chawla, 1992) or social support, autonomy, and positive feelings (Langhout, 2003).

With this understanding, one can better understand why Thomas and Timothy thought their mother was happier and more enjoyable to be with outside of the schoolroom, yet preferred Louise in the schoolroom over the VISE teachers[8] who came each year. The narrative shows that the "school day" was bearable for them, because of their home tutor, their mother, with whom they have a close relationship. Louise is a significant person in her children's lives.

The preceding offers some examples of the insights gained from the narrative of the Michaelson family. Together, the three families' experiences offer a richer and more informed understanding of why everyday life in the schoolrooms was the way that it was for the families, how it came to be that way, and what it meant for the home tutors and children to experience it in those ways. As this article, and other modes of dissemination my research will undertake, joins the conversation about distance education in Australia, I hope it will support more useful ways of thinking about the families' experiences and that even more provocative ideas and questions about practice and research will be generated.

Notes

1. To protect anonymity, the name of the school of distance education has not been identified and all names of the participants in this research are pseudonyms. The school of distance education serves families who are geographically isolated, making travelling each day to and from the nearest public school inconvenient or impossible.
2. Mustering is the movement of sheep, cattle, horses, and goats using horses, trailers, motorbikes, vehicles, or helicopters.
3. A jackaroo is a man who is learning to work on a sheep or cattle station.
4. Curriculum materials focused on the subject area of English and activities for specifically teaching and learning about such things as reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, shaping, generic structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation.
5. Smoko is a short break from work, usually in the morning between breakfast and lunch, or in the afternoon between lunch and dinner. Similar to the term "recess" that is used in North America.
6. Curriculum materials focused on the theme introduced in LAC 1 and integrated with the subject areas of Science, Health, Art, Music, Physical Education, and Social Studies.
7. Children who are in the same year level and live close to each other may join in together in their own area to participate in what is called a cluster. Teaching staff travel to various towns to meet with the children and their families for a day of "school." The number of cluster days each group can attend is usually four per year.
8. Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education (VISE) is a volunteer educational service set up to assist children and parents in remote areas of Australia. VISE tutors are mainly retired teachers or adults with experience in education. VISE tutors stay with families for about 6 weeks.

Note on Contributor

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