

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CASES

The overarching aim of the study being reported in this thesis was to develop theory about how parents manage the role of being home tutor in remote and rural locations. Understanding how home tutors experience, respond to, seek to manage and exert control over the education of their children is limited. The observations presented here in the individual case studies are an attempt to provide a rich and thick description of the role that parents undertake as home tutor in response to these questions. This chapter begins with a brief outline of the development of the Western Australian Correspondence Schools and the inception of SOTAs. The purpose of including this description is to situate the SOTAs within the state education system of Western Australia. Five major case studies then follow, describing the SOTAs in Western Australia. These are Carnarvon School of the Air, Meekatharra School of the Air, Kalgoorlie School of the Air, Port Hedland School of the Air, and, finally the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE).

BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE INCEPTION OF THE SCHOOLS OF THE AIR

The Western Australia Correspondence School was officially established in September 1918. Similar correspondence schools were established in Victoria in 1914, New South Wales in 1916, Tasmania in 1919,

South Australia in 1920 and Queensland in 1922 (Calzone, 1991). However, Western Australia was recognized as a pioneer in the area. Gordon Worner, the then Superintendent of Primary Education in Western Australia was quoted as saying that “as far back as 1903 correspondence lessons were given to young people preparing for a teaching career “ (Eakins, 1964). Prior to 1918 families who had no means of providing a boarding school education or the resources to hire a governess or tutor were left to their own devices to manage the schooling of their children.

Clarence Eakins was involved with correspondence learning in Western Australia from its inception and was appointed as the first Head Master of the Correspondence School in May 1920, a position he held until his retirement 31 years later. During this period many developments occurred. A comprehensive curriculum was developed covering early childhood to Junior Certificate and offered to many different categories of students. Students were also able to listen to general broadcasts from 1940, which supplemented the written correspondence materials. In 1959 the Education Department of Western Australia established Meekatharra School of the Air, the first of five in Western Australia. Twenty-seven children became the foundation pupils of “the then largest class-room in the West” (Calzoni, 1991, p.55). The classroom of Mr John Smedley, the first School of the Air teacher, encompassed 500,000 square kilometers. Following the success of the initial school at Meekatharra other schools were established: Derby, 1960; Kalgoorlie, 1962; Port Hedland, 1960; Carnarvon, 1968 (see Map 5.1). Further details about the individual SOTAs are presented later in this thesis.



Map 5.1: Location of Schools of the Air

In 1983 the Minister for Education, Robert Pearce MLC opened The Distance Education Centre, which was the result of the amalgamation of the Western Australia Correspondence School, the Isolated Families Early Childhood Correspondence Scheme and the Isolated Students Matriculation Scheme to cater for Kindergarten to Year 12 distance education. The development of an even more responsive system for the delivery of schooling to remote and isolated students occurred in 1995 with the addition of the five Schools of the Air which had previously stood outside of the correspondence schools administration. The new school was called The School of Isolated and

Distance Education (SIDE). As a gateway for teaching and learning SIDE has a government mandate to provide access to and equity in education for students in isolated circumstances across Western Australia.

The structure of the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) has already been described earlier in this thesis. The school has a large and diverse student population ranging from Pre-primary to Year 12. Students who are enrolled in a SOTA are mostly primary-aged students who are unable to attend a conventional school due to geographical isolation. SIDE offers through the SOTAs a similar basic curriculum as most primary schools in Western Australia. SIDE also develops written and audiovisual materials customised for the distance-learning student, kits to accompany many courses and a fully equipped Resource Centre that has an extensive book, video and audiotape library with research and loan facilities. SIDE has a range of communications systems to enable interaction between students, families and teachers, which include telephones, electronic mail, Higher Frequency Radio (HFR) interactive multimedia and the delivery of, live television programs via satellite technology.

Families have played a significant role in the education of their children through the SIDE. This is particularly true of those attached to the SOTAs (Calzoni, 1991; Fitzpatrick, 1984). Since the SOTAs inception parents were involved in “all areas of the schools’ activities: problems of supervision and of cooperation between parents and teachers, fund raising for the purchase of transceivers and school requisites, and along with the running of school camps and seminars” (Calzoni, 1991, p.132). The Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association (ICPA) formed in Bourke, 1971, and since then it has established

Federal and state branches. It is composed of families who are particularly active in the SOTAs and has “helped to unify the otherwise insular operations of these schools, directing them to the wider issues being tackled at present in the education of isolated children. ICPA influence has also extended to Ministries of Education, where it has assisted in State programmes for restructuring distance education” (Calzoni, 1991, p.142).

Parents have voiced concerns about their management of the role of home tutor for many years. Condon and Edmonson (1998), articulate very clearly the special bond that develops between home tutors and the comfort to be had in knowing that each has had the “same doubts and the same problems” (p.1). Kopke (1983) stated that:

Facing the responsibility of supervising your children’s education, when one has not been trained for that purpose can be worrying, and it is fairly normal for parents to feel anxious and concerned as to whether they are coping adequately with the task or not (p.vii).

The complexity of the role of home tutor is aptly described in the following personal experience of one parent:

Mother Survival

Puff the magic dragon lived by the sea and frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honnalee . . .” The lively strains of this old favourite drift across the horse paddock. ... It is the beginning of another school day with the family round the piano greeting the day with a hymn and song.

Dishes washed and dried to the accompaniment of a few quick "tables" and spelling words, rubbish buckets emptied, music practised, teeth brushed—all ready for a start on the written work. Just time for Mathematics and a little language before School of the Air assembly. After the usual greetings and hymn singing comes the exchange of news ... "a dozen chickens hatched", "Mum killed a snake", "Dad got bogged in the Land-Rover and walked home to get us to pull him out", "we had two and a half inches of rain", "We went to town and I bought a new pair of boots", or even a vivid description of the family mare presenting her offspring to the world at the front gate!

Back to the written work with one eye on the clock so as not to miss a grade lesson "on-air", a Social Studies, Music or Singing broadcast on A.B.C. radio, or, if the engine happens to be going, a television programme on Science perhaps, or Mathematics, while Mum starts a load of washing. By afternoon there could be a Singing lesson, Junior Red Cross or Pony Club session in which to participate on School of the Air. Plus, of course, the usual Composition, Dictation or Art from the leaflets.

All sounds smooth and simple, but interspersed with rescuing a baby or toddler, or perhaps a retarded child, from mischief, making endless smokes in response to "I've put the kettle on, dear", politely entertaining the unexpected

visitor—the man from the stock firm, insurance agent, or the man collecting for the Royal Institute for the Blind, who being unable to speak converses in note form. The not infrequent call from Dad to "please try to finish school early so that you can take sheep away on the horses", or simply to "quickly give a hand drafting". More interruptions with the telephone with its brisk summons.

Panic stations when time comes round for the big moment of an appearance in a school play. "What to wear to be an elephant, or perhaps a beautiful princess?" With the help of a grey plastic raincoat or Mum's satin nightie and pearls, the situation is soon in hand and the eager participant anxious to describe to the listening audience his or her exact appearance. Coping with the distortion of dust static on the transceiver, resulting in a matter of fact reply to the question, "Why didn't you say good morning to Miss Gordon?" or "Oh, that's all right, Mum. She's gone mad, and now we have Mrs Adkins", His interpretation of the School of the Air Principal's words of "Miss Gordon got married and now we have Mrs Adkins".

All serve to make teaching by Correspondence for an average of twelve to thirteen years a bit of a challenge. A challenge coloured by moments of excitement when the mail comes with corrected work decorated with stars or encouraging comments from the teacher so far away. The

welcome disruption of a Sports Day and the opportunity to meet friends who have previously been voices. A visit from the Pony Club instructor or a group of students from Indonesia who depart with the words, "We leave with our heart".

So many compensations for the few years spent in the role of "teacher" and the overheard dubious compliment of, "Mum's all right, but when she's teaching she's awful" from one's presumed conscientious student. The close and enduring family ties established in those formative years weigh heavily in the balance for, as with "Puff, the painted wings and giant rings" make way only too soon for other things. (Kopke, 1983, p.187-188)

CASE STUDY NO. 1: CARNARVON SCHOOL OF THE AIR

Carnarvon is located on the north west coast of Western Australia in the Gascoyne Region (see Map 5.1). The Gascoyne District spreads broadly 550 kilometres north, east and south of Carnarvon. The area experiences harsh subtropical climatic conditions, frequently floods and is subject to cyclonic activity. The day after the researcher completed data collection in Carnarvon, cyclonic floodwaters closed the airport and cut off access to the town centre.

The region supports a population of 7000 people. The main industries around the town include horticulture, a prawn and snapper fishery and vast pastoral concerns. The region is comprised of mostly arid holdings generally

between 125,000 –200,000 hectares devoted to wool growing and beef cattle. A smaller trade in wild goats also exists.

The SOTA in Carnarvon (CSOTA) opened on September 9, 1968, with thirty-two students enrolled under the Teacher in Charge, Mr Frank Atkinson (Calzoni, 1991). The CSOTA catchment area covers an area of 145,000 square kms. Atkinson had been an itinerant teacher for the Western Australian correspondence school so he had plenty of experience in the routines and expectations of families in the area. He developed radio lessons in conjunction with the supplied written materials and worked directly with the children on these (Ashton, 1971). At the time the Gascoyne District was divided into two groups of families. Those that lived north of the township of Carnarvon were mostly living on widely separated and isolated pastoral stations with poor transport and communications. South of Carnarvon the families had access to more reliable transport and communications and less distance to be negotiated between stations and towns (Calzoni, 1991). Each established parent support groups: to the north Parents and Citizens Association (P&C) while the southern families joined the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA). There were rivalries between the two groups, mostly due to the difficulties of the northern families in participating as readily as the southern Gascoyne families, but by the 1970's and with the establishment of another ICPA branch in the Ashburton district, the CSOTA became the centre of concern and "thus became a unifying influence in itself, a school community" (Calzoni, 1991, p.86).

Over the years since the CSOTA was established conditions have altered for the families who live in the Gascoyne District. The introduction of inexpensive and long lasting AM and short-wave radio broadcasts ensures that

communication reaches even the most remote station. Satellite technology, while still expensive, is also available for those in the most remote of locations. Further, short wave transceivers provide contact with the RFDS. The high frequency radio network continues but is now supplemented with computer links and quality distance education materials. Lessons are broadcast using modern equipment from school studios over a range of frequencies in the HF radio band. With the introduction of new technologies such as www and email, some families are able to take advantage of new teaching and learning strategies and resources. Still of concern however, is the cost of ensuring that all children have access to these technologies. It appears that the infrastructure required for appropriate computer servers and cabling is expensive due to the vast distances and parents are vocal in their dissatisfaction of the service provided by national communications providers. Weather also hinders technological communication as atmospheric conditions particularly in the morning can make HF radio impossible to use. Most families rely on HF radio bands and the telephone.

While in the past travel in the area was hindered by poor roads, families are able to travel into Carnarvon or to other stations more easily. However, the harsh climatic forces such as floods and cyclones periodically turn unsealed roads into long stretches of mud, the airport closes and swollen rivers often mean that stations are cut off from the town. Telecommunications often fail. Yet where once families would often go a significant number of months in complete isolation, this is no longer true for all. Not all families are “islands to themselves” (Fitzpatrick, 1982, p.186). However, there is still a measure of isolation as long distances and the cost of petrol restricts journeys. It is unlikely

that families will travel without a significant reason such as shopping, or medical appointments.

In 2000, the families were located in the surrounding sheep and cattle pastoral properties, small communities and tourist settlements. The school population has a stable core population on pastoral stations but numbers of students on surrounding settlements fluctuate. Of the 72 children enrolled, approximately 25% were aboriginal students. Most students had been enrolled at the school from pre-primary and would most likely complete their primary years with the school before leaving home to attend boarding school.

Many of the CSOTA children in the Gascoyne have known no other life outside of the station. However, this is not true for the parents. Many have attended schools in Perth or Geraldton, have travelled nationally and internationally, moved from other areas within Australia or relocated within Western Australia. This picture of the families has changed little since Fitzpatrick (1982) noted thus:

Their cumulative experience, and individually in many cases, is considerable. They are aware of much of what the 'outside' world has to offer their children, and know that the children must eventually enter into it to complete their education and compete for jobs, to find themselves a niche in the society. To whatever extent station life induces a parochial perspective, most parents can still place it in a broader context. They are not simply indigenous viewers of an 'outside' world. They are products of that world. (p.186)

The CSOTA teachers provide the central point of contact for the students that are scattered over the immense Gascoyne district. Teachers work closely with families and consistently with 'mothers' of the children. CSOTA also organizes student camps and 'home tutor support. However, the children and their mothers or governesses remain essentially isolated even though they have regular and in most cases daily radio contact with CSOTA. Few families have face-to-face contact with peers, other home tutors or teachers more than occasionally. The level of isolation for home tutors can be particularly frustrating and although they can catch up at events such as the Seminar they do not always want a quick fix but rather support for the '*job*' that they are doing. The parents ring each other but claim they should do more of this. They indicated that it was useful to talk to each other about the issues that arise and felt it was at times more appropriate than discussing things with their teacher.

Life on the station while connected to the 'outside' world through broadcasts, radio, correspondence materials and telephone does not result in reduction of isolation for the children and their families, but rather alters the isolation. Parents become frustrated that they do not have the same access to what is available to other children in more conventional settings. The connection to the wider world rather exacerbates the reality of what they do not have. Fitzgerald (1982) highlighted this as a potential other dimension to the problems of providing for isolated children and it would seem this prophecy has become reality.

Parents do want to provide their child with the best education possible and view the role as one of immense personal responsibility. They have chosen to undertake the role and know that they are going to teach. For some parents

the advantages of being in this position outweigh the disadvantages as they see their role as having a significant impact on what and how the children will learn. CSOTA encourages the home tutor to establish a home schoolroom and to attend 'on-air' lessons through the broadcasts. The broadcasts aim to enhance and provide strategies for assisting the home tutor in understanding the written materials and supervising the progress of their children. During 2000 the school conducted the annual training seminar for home tutors at which they were able to discuss issues and problems, connect with their child's 'on-air' teacher and hear guest speakers who provided a link to the latest developments in curriculum resources and teaching practice. This is one way in which the school provides professional teaching support, educational programs and information to support remote students and their families.

CSOTA has a vibrant, active parent group, and committed teachers. It has a well-considered mission, and vision and a set of core values, which are in response to their commitment to a partnership with the families encompassed within the Gascoyne District. Their materials state that they are committed to:

- Being responsive to issues and circumstances, which may affect the nature and quality of student outcomes.
- Excellence in the provision of support to students and home tutors
- Encouragement of an active partnership with home tutors to facilitate excellence in teaching and learning.
- Recognition and respect for teacher's professional knowledge and Home tutors efforts and experience
- Open communication and two way accountability.

The support provided to the home tutors is considerable and includes:

- Home tutor seminar- (In Carnarvon with student camp)
- On-air home tutor- teacher meetings (weekly or as required)
- Transition seminar (Home tutors of students in K-3)
- Telephone support
- Home visits by staff
- Area camps for home tutor development.

The home tutors during 2002 consisted mostly of mothers with a few governesses. At the Seminar the researcher was able to meet the home tutors and developed a consistent picture of their role. The home tutors located their role, which is one amongst many, as being the most important. The role of home tutor sat alongside being a mother, wife, business manager, and keeper of accountants and cook for shearers. Many also helped out as part of the business of station life during mustering times and shearing seasons. Some of the more experienced home tutors stated that the role had impacted significantly on their relationships within the family and others outside of the family. Parents newer to the program indicated that they had no idea what the impact might be. Overall, the parents felt that the relationship of mother to child and home tutor to child were often confused by their child/ren and that this often was the cause of behavioural problems during and beyond the school room. The home tutors felt that maintaining healthy and happy relationships with their children was a further concern. Many of the mothers thought that it was *'quite difficult swapping between being what your child perceived as their 'teacher' and also knowing that you're their mother'*. The children often had difficulty in casting the two roles apart and became confused.

There was also some concern by the home tutors that other family members did not appreciate the complexity or amount of time that was consumed by the role. Enlisting the support of other family members was particularly important. The home tutors at Carnarvon felt that it was critical that other family members understand how much time and energy goes into doing this '*job*'. One mother shared that her husband really did not understand what she did and saw her in the schoolroom as just '*colouring in*'. He even suggested: '*I could do the book work while I was in the school room teaching*'. He did not understand the amount of concentration required or how much energy it takes. Regardless of whether they could separate their roles or not, and even though many tried to be the 'teacher' in the schoolroom and 'mum' outside '*you stay mum. There is no two ways about it*'.

The relationships established between the home tutors and teachers were very good although it was observed that some parents felt that they were '*left to it*'. Yet, it seemed that some home tutors were pleased to have a class teacher as they were after all ultimately responsible and in the schoolroom on a day-to-day basis. The home tutors realize their place in the hierarchy regardless of the collaborative role they undertake. They understand that the teacher should be respected and appreciate the recognition they also receive from their teachers. Similarly to Fitzgerald (1982), the mothers in the interviews were reluctant to say anything too critical of their teachers as they felt the blame for a teacher's basic competency probably lay with SIDE. There was also a sense that '*well this is what we have and there were few options but to get on with on it*'. Many of the teachers visit the stations, see this as a priority, and indicated that they try to visit each child at least once a term. Many also have become friends of

the families; this is no doubt due to the realization by both just how unusual the educational journey for their child is. At times some teachers felt that the mothers could be overly demanding. They could be difficult and unsympathetic in their expectations of the teacher. Some 'new' inexperienced teachers thought that at times home tutors made life purposefully difficult.

It was usual for this group of home tutors to maintain a 'school routine'. The routine could include a starting and finishing times, scheduled morning tea 'recess' breaks, and school holidays as per the current state school calendar. The importance of having a learning environment and routine assisted the home tutor in managing their children and their role in 'schooling'. It seemed for this group of home tutors that if the routines were in place then they had a better chance of achieving the schoolwork.

The home tutors have each developed a timetable of 'subjects' based on the correspondence materials and the broadcasts from the Carnarvon SOTA. The schoolroom operated in all cases in the mornings and lessons started for many early in the day and completed by lunchtime-noon. The schoolroom for some families was a unique space designated as the place where learning was undertaken. For others however, it was the kitchen table or the lounge room floor. All agreed that it was essential to plan ahead as it was all too easy to slip into chaos. The parents were particularly concerned that daily life and 'school times' were managed effectively. Children and other family members were given extra jobs to do, and a sense of sharing the burden of the doing the 'job' of home tutor was distributed.

Another aspect of planning was the school timetable. Some mothers said that they set up a schoolroom timetable for the order of what the children

would do. It was not a timetable of how much time, but rather to start with handwriting and move onto maths. These mothers felt it enabled their children to have some direction: '*They just know they have got to do this in order and that way they get through it*'. The subject areas that received the most attention were those that had correspondence materials to support them. The parents tended to complete the 'Sets' in the order presented and in conjunction with SOTA broadcasts.

While parents valued the idea of a curriculum, which was broad in scope and provided a range of experiences, there was a focus on subject areas that were seen to be more important. Literacy had a particular emphasis as most parents felt that this was very important. Other subject areas that were often '*left off*' included The Arts, Science and Physical Education. The Arts were often not included in correspondence materials at the primary school level although an Art Box was available to every child. Parents noted that children were often required '*to draw things*'. There were also opportunities to '*do drama*' and many played dress-ups and had a box of clothes for this purpose located in the schoolroom. Other families really valued the music and art classes that were provided by CSOTA but the timing of these often made participation difficult. They were usually broadcast in the afternoon and children were often too tired by then or they were busy with other commitments and some couldn't receive the broadcast due to the atmospheric conditions. Others felt they did not have the skills to be able to provide effective help to their children and just didn't '*bother*'. Although the parents placed value on the Arts, Science and Physical Education, they did not have

adequate skills or support in the same way as other subject areas such as Mathematics or Literacy.

Carnarvon SOTA supported the concept of an all inclusive curriculum framework and relied on staff interest and expertise to encourage the incorporation of all curriculum areas. They also identified members of staff with expertise who they relied on for developing particular areas. Others contributed as appropriate but tended to focus on their strengths and comfort areas within the curriculum in general. As an example one teacher felt they could not sing so therefore contributed much to the artwork of her class but relied on the teacher with expertise in music to run the music sessions. Another teacher participated in sports and coordinated the sports camps.

Many parents commented on the resources they received and particularly the Art Box, which they felt did not contain enough materials, although the staff at SIDE indicated materials were expensive and they provided what they could. Each Art Box was worth about \$70.00 and included a range of materials. Some parents felt they should be given more white paint as this often ran out too quickly. It seemed to the researcher that this was an issue regarding communication and that more white paint could be provided but it needed to be requested.

Most of the home tutors had several children enrolled in the CSOTA- in one case, nine children, all at different levels of schooling. This, for some home tutors was described as enormously challenging as 'on-air' broadcasts, and the management of multiple age levels or creating mixed age activities all had to happen at once. Further, this scenario could be complicated if there was a child not at school age that required constant monitoring and attention. Some

home tutors found that they at times did not attend ‘on-air’ lessons that they thought were not essential and seemed to pick what they thought was essential and non essential attendance. For all home tutors it seemed critical that correspondence materials were completed within the designated time allocations and they sought help from SOTA teachers in getting through these materials. They observed that at times some of the material in the correspondence ‘sets’ was not appropriate to the child, was hard to understand or the child was finding the work really ‘boring’.

There has been a lot of confusion about whether the home tutors could alter the work: ‘*what can be left out*’ and ‘*will it matter?*’ One mother indicated that she was told: ‘*the only time you modify the work is if the children could not cope with it*’, whereas others who complained to the writers at SIDE were told: ‘*That is an area which needs to be discussed with your teacher*’. There was for some an anxiety that if they did not complete the materials whether their children would miss out on something. Some have indicated a frustration with SIDE and their allocated class teachers who they trust as being the real ‘*teachers*’, but are concerned that advice is sometimes not consistent. In the end, for a parent security and safety lay in completing all of the materials

The home tutor role is a complex one for those who have chosen to undertake this ‘*job*’ at the CSOTA. It seems that a successful home tutor here is well organised and has established schoolroom routines for running both the school day and the curriculum. The curriculum presented in the correspondence materials was considered more important than areas that were more difficult to include and were not prioritised in the schooling experience. Parents highly valued as part of the breadth that schooling other areas of the

curriculum but were not committed to their inclusion. Many parents just do not have the skills or time to engage with curriculum areas such as the Arts, Science or Physical Education as examples. The hazards seem to be in preserving who they are in multiple roles while carrying the burden of being the 'home teacher' as one of those roles. A high level of anxiety is revealed at the level of responsibility and the need to be reassured that what they are doing is good enough.

CASE STUDY NO. 2: MEEKATHARRA SCHOOL OF THE AIR

Meekatharra School of the Air (MSOTA) was established in 1959 with one teacher, who was Teacher in Charge. MSOTA fell under the control of the WA Correspondence School in Perth. A group of 27 children started the school and in 1979 twenty years after its inception MSOTA became its own school with governance under a principal. The original school was on the grounds of the RFDS. In 1975 MSOTA moved adjacent to Meekatharra District High School and underwent extensive renovation in 1995. Like other SOTAs, MSOTA utilised the frequencies of the RFDS until 1975 when the two studios began using their own school frequencies (5260 megahertz (MHz) and 4880 MHz). MSOTA still uses the RFDS frequencies as appropriate.

Meekatharra is located 764 kms north east of Perth and 541 kms inland and east of Geraldton. Meekatharra has a population of 2000 people and is essentially a gold town (discovered in the 1890's) that has become a major supply centre for the pastoral and mining interests in the East Murchison (refer to Map 5.1). Meekatharra sits at the centre of a vast shire which covers 99, 974 square kilometres of semi-desert where mining, sheep and cattle and managed.

There are only 48 properties in the entire district with the smallest about 250,000 acres in size. Meekatharra is the first town in Australia to be powered by solar energy and consistently records high temperatures most of the year. A solar-diesel power station was built in 1982 was considered the largest in the world but now lays dormant.

In 2000 there were 89 students enrolled at MSOTA. This is the largest SOTA in Western Australia in terms of number of students. The total area covers 540,000 square kilometers with boundaries that stretch east of Wiluna to the Northern Territory border, north to Newman, as far west as Mullewa and in a southerly direction almost to Wubin.

The school caters similarly to other SOTAs for children aged 4-12 years. The schools' population consists mostly of families who live on stations of not less than 250,000 acres. One parent informed the researcher that the vast holdings are necessary, as one sheep requires 10 acres of land to feed adequately. A few families live at roadhouses, in Aboriginal communities or are involved in prospecting. All of the families live a considerable distance from Meekatharra and it was not unusual for a family to drive up to four or even six hours to reach MSOTA. Many of the families had children enrolled in MSOTA since pre-primary; most have more than one child being schooled in this way. Many had older siblings attending boarding school in Perth or Geraldton.

MSOTA documents set out clearly the criteria to be met before a child can be enrolled. This includes access to a transceiver and a competent person to carry out the role of home tutor. Air lessons are to be attended regularly, and if parents are in doubt about their capacity to meet the criteria, they are directed

to consult the principal. Parents can hire a transceiver but due to the limited availability children in pre-primary might have to wait a year or have the one allocated to them withdrawn for older children. Parents are provided with a Meekatharra School of the Air Home Tutors' Handbook and timetables for air lessons. Although the Sets are sent from SIDE in Perth to MSOTA, teachers process the 'Sets' from the MSOTA base. Children rely on their home tutor and class teacher for support in completing the print based materials.

During 2000 the home tutors consisted mostly of mothers of the children. There were three governesses. There were also many multi-age families and home tutors often wrestled three or more children in the schoolroom. Parents usually communicated daily with their child's teacher through the [Dionna] HF radio. Children all attended air-lessons, which complemented the lessons covered by the written or correspondence materials. Turn around time on marking materials was often slow and many parents reported that they hardly looked at returned marked materials as they had often moved on. However, others looked forward to comments by teachers on the *Set* work and were disappointed if there wasn't enough feedback. As one parent said, '*this kind of feedback was really important and if there was not enough written you could only suppose that all was OK*'. Sometimes teachers wrote on tasks, '*Why wasn't this done?*' And some home tutors found this communication particularly accusatory as it implied that they were not doing their job well enough.

The MSOTA teachers provide a point of contact for the children in this area. In 2000 the staff at MSOTA consisted of the Principal, 8 full time teachers, 3 part time teachers and a registrar. Two support teachers were also

attached to the school: Support Officer-Learning Difficulties, to support and assist staff in developing programs specifically suited to the individual needs of students in isolated situations and an Aboriginal Support Teacher who worked closely with the Aboriginal communities in the Meekatharra area. The school organised children into class groups and provided state approved curriculum materials based on the Curriculum Framework (CCWA, 1998).

The air lessons were viewed by the home tutors as essential for understanding the materials and for making contact with other children. Some parents felt that this was the best aspect as they rarely went '*into town*' or saw other children. They also enjoyed hearing the '*news*' of other stations and often found the accounts that their children provided amusing and insightful. One parent stated that she was brought to tears on many occasions hearing her child discuss various aspects of station life. Teachers at MSOTA felt that the school visits were most helpful as it gave them a greater insight into the learning environments, which varied considerably. The teacher was able to make suggestions about how to make the learning environment more attractive and conducive to learning. Parents also felt that it was good for the teacher to see how the child worked. However, having the teacher attend the schoolroom or station often brought out *best behaviour* and this did not reflect the reality for some home tutors. The contrast in relationships between the teacher and child and home tutor and child was sharpened during these times. Some home tutors found the experience demoralizing as they were doing all the hard work and felt unappreciated by both child and teacher.

Parents also commented on the relationships that they built within the school community as invaluable. They spent considerable time consoling each

other during 1999-2000. Many parents reported a high level of dissatisfaction at MSOTA during this time period. As background, MSOTA has had one principal and two acting principals between 1998-2001. A permanent principal was appointed in 2002 and lasted one term. Finding an adequate and appropriate principal has been difficult and not surprising, given the remoteness of the appointment. There has been considerable stress placed on staff and parents during this time period. Many issues have caused a break down in trust although this appears to be rebuilding. Parents were particularly disillusioned with the attitudes and factions appearing amongst staff and families. They highlighted the need for clear and committed communication from teachers.

Few parents were willing to be outright accusatory of teachers, but were critical of expertise and experience. They were inclined to ask each other for assistance rather than their teacher. There was certainly a strong perception that they were often better off doing it on their own and did not find the teacher support constructive. There was camaraderie amongst this group of parents who, if they worked together, could ensure a quality education.

The air lessons varied at MSOTA and the younger students tended to have 20-minute sessions, whereas the older students were allocated 45 minutes time slots. The air lessons at MSOTA usually had up to 8 children participating. Many parents complained that reception was a very real issue and that by about 11 o'clock it was impossible to hear the teachers and even other children. It is the researcher's understanding that this was in part due to atmospheric conditions. Many of the lessons began early in the day at 7.30 am in order to address this issue. Almost all of the parents said that it was hopeless

in Summer and a little better in Winter. Many parents complained that music during air lessons was hard to hear. Instrumental music kind of '*dropped out*' and songs with lots of lyrics '*well just forget it*'. Others indicated that the equipment was at times unreliable and waiting for repairs or parts also made access difficult.

Many of the MSOTA children spend considerable periods of time in isolation from their peers and relish opportunities to connect with their friends at MSOTA camps and the annual Seminar. It is for many a welcome relief from station life. Many of the parents have been established in the area for considerable time, although others have moved into pastoral stations in recent years. They are a committed group of parents who place a high priority on quality schooling for their children and few have a parochial perspective. Amongst this group of parents there is a high level of interest in the running of the school. They participate in a range of meetings that include general home tutor meetings, year level home tutor meetings, special purpose meetings, the monthly P & C meeting, Isolated Children Parents Association and three parents members who are financial in the P & C can be elected to the School Council.

In 2000 the curriculum at MSOTA consisted of the usual subject groupings and aligned with the correspondence Sets sent from SIDE. The focus here was predominantly on literacy and many parents reported that while they followed the on-air lessons as their timetable they usually completed materials that were literacy based '*first thing*'. They mostly felt that these were really important and should take priority. Schooling would stop and start to accommodate the air lessons. Other clubs or options are also offered over the

air. During 2000 these included the music, art and book clubs. Prior to 1999 the school had a music specialist who established the first Choir of the Air at MSOTA. When this teacher departed the club continued in an adhoc manner and relied on an interested staff member to pick it up. Unfortunately the new staff member had a different style and departed midway through the year for a city position.

Parents who had children in the choir felt that it really contributed a lot to building confidence. They were also very excited to have gone as a group to sing in Perth to a famous American choral director, Mary Goetz, who thought that they were wonderful. One of the teachers described the choir rehearsals as astounding:

I could imagine that the kids would all be sitting at their radios, she would count them in, and they would start singing. It was just like assembly, they couldn't hear each other and often started and finished at different times. It was truly amazing. The only time they got together was at camps or Seminar.

The curriculum attempted to cover all of the KLAs and was undergoing considerable change and rewriting during 2000. Physical Education, Social Science and the Arts areas of the curriculum while integrated at some levels were often relegated by parents as being unimportant compared to reading and writing. There was a distinct theme of a lack of time to fit them in. Once the children had completed the written work there was just not enough energy left to add in more school work especially if you had to go out on the station.

Having more than one child could also affect the art making process. Often younger siblings made a huge mess or inadvertently destroyed the older sibling's work. Another family had only one child so found some of the physical education tasks were impossible to do. Other parents felt they lacked suitable and adequate skills and could not access simple resources such as sand or beakers. Others admitted that if they didn't have experience in these areas then they tended to avoid doing them. One parent felt they were in a cultural vacuum and needed to make a point of accessing the Arts and museums on visits to the city. The family would go to a gallery, museum or a concert if it was possible and they had the time.

Few parents felt that they had been adequately prepared to be a home tutor. The pressures and expectations from other family members, children, teachers and themselves came as an enormous shock to many. Almost all of the parents felt that the best support came from other home tutors and could not imagine how they would have coped if they didn't have that network.

Again the role of home tutor was a multifarious and busy one for parents at MSOTA. The schoolroom was a place that varied here with some home tutors maintaining a particular space while others did not. Parents were busy managing stations and roadside cafes and had just enough time to get through the written materials sent from SIDE. They had problems with equipment and the air lessons were often not available due to atmospheric conditions. At times they could access a varied curriculum but relied on expertise of staff. During 2000 this group of parents found communication an issue due to changes in the management of the school and lost an enormous amount of trust in the teachers. The home tutors valued a breadth of curriculum but had

little time to provide experiences beyond the Sets. This was not true for all home tutors as some engaged in art making at home or joined one of the schools extra curricular clubs. This group of home tutors saw themselves as quite self-sufficient and had little time for negotiating effective communication with teachers and the school. They resorted to talking with each other and '*banded together*' to provide support for each other. Their urgency was expressed in terms of '*survival*' and such comments as '*come what may will manage the schooling of our kids*'.

CASE STUDY NO. 3: KALGOORLIE SCHOOL OF THE AIR

In 2000 there were 55 students drawn from 30 families enrolled at Kalgoorlie School of the Air (KalsOTA). The total catchment area covers more than 750,000 square kilometres of the West Australian state, stretching 400 km north to the town of Wiluna, 1,200 km north east to the Northern Territory, South Australian and Western Australian borders, 800 km east to the South Australian border and 350 km south to the coastal town of Esperance (See Map 5.1). KalSota caters for children from Kindergarten to Year 7. Distance is the main reason why children attend KalsOTA. Many live on pastoral stations but there are also children whose families are involved in gold prospecting and sandalwood cutting. A smaller number of families are remotely located police officers and medical staff. Half of the families have several children enrolled and supervise schooling at various levels. Older siblings often board in Kalgoorlie to complete secondary education and a smaller number board in Perth.

The criteria to be enrolled at KalSOTA are the same as for the other SOTAs and children must be geographically isolated from a mainstream school or from transport to the nearest school. Children complete Sets that originated from SIDE and are assisted in their education by a home tutor, which at KalSOTA was more often one of the parents and usually the mother. There were several governesses during 2000. The role of home tutor is a demanding one, particularly so as many of the home tutors at KalSOTA also assist in the running of their properties or businesses.

Kalgoorlie had both experienced and inexperienced home tutors in 2000. All new home tutors were presented with the *Kalgoorlie School of the Air Information Booklet* (KalSOTA, 1999), which is updated on an ongoing basis. They were also given the *Home Tutor's Guide* (KalSOTA, no date), which contained ideas and suggestions for home tutors. KalSOTA has a clearly stated school ethos that encourages families to engage with the community of the School of the Air and contribute to the school development plan and school budgets. KalSOTA aims in 2000 were:

- A learning situation that satisfactorily replaces the conventional classroom setting
- To create an atmosphere, within the special learning situation, where positive attitudes to education are developed
- To provide children, home tutors and parents with a sense of school unity and cohesion
- To assist and encourage home tutors as much as possible in their task to educate the children

- To foster a spirit of team work and cooperation between School of the Air staff, home tutors and children
- To provide a situation in which socialisation of the individual has every opportunity to be fulfilled. (KalsOTA, 1999, p.3).

Parents engaged with KalsOTA on various levels and were active in the P & C and ICPA. Meetings were held on-air and throughout the year via telephone conferencing. There were two ICPA branches, one for the Nullabor and one for Kalgoorlie. Parents also attended the annual Home Tutor's Seminar-Student Camp. The seminar provided an opportunity for socializing for children and parents and for professional development for the home tutor. The seminar usually focused on the needs of the group and the families decide what the agenda for Seminar will be. Further opportunities were provided for both children and parents at the sports camp in Term 3, the end of year camp held at Point Peron where all of the 6 SIDE sites come together and a final end of year break up held at KalsOTA.

The home visiting program for children and home tutors was an important feature of KalsOTA. Their class teacher visited families three times a year. The purpose of the home visits was to provide support for the student and home tutor. Usually the teacher worked on the current Set with the child and discussed progress and issues with the home tutor. Many home tutors found the visit from the class teacher a welcome relief and took the opportunity to step outside of the schoolroom. Many of the home tutors felt the effect of the role acutely. They had problems with managing the role during busy times of the year when they were needed in businesses and at times required more than moral support. The job was exhausting and while appreciated, not always

understood by those around them. While teachers were a point of contact for help, many of the home tutors had established networks amongst the other mothers and rang each other for support. All found relationships with their children were affected and while they managed to separate the roles, others had long periods of frustrating behaviours such as refusing to complete work, from the children.

During 2000 there were six teachers, the school principal an educational support officer and four non-teaching staff at KalSOTA. The teaching staff included a music specialist and LOTE teacher. Otherwise teachers were allocated a class group of similarly aged children although at times this was a split class group that included as an example Years 6 and 7.

Life in the vast KalSOTA catchment was necessarily connected by the radio broadcasts. Children attended 'on-air' lessons throughout the morning. KalSOTA recommended that the home tutor should attend broadcasts with their children to ensure that tasks and instructions were understood. Most home tutors did attend the broadcast lessons with their children and found the contact with others an essential point of contact in the day. Communication with the school and teachers was very important to the home tutors although this was not the only means of solving problems.

The curriculum at KalSOTA was essentially print-based with language, mathematics and handwriting forming the predominant allocation of time within the week. Home tutors were given a suggested weekly timetable although most designed their own. Still, the emphasis was on language, creative writing and reading. Radio broadcasts similarly support the curriculum and other curricula areas such as music, social studies, art/craft and physical

education often fell outside this timetable. The following timetable was adapted from materials that parents receive from KalSOTA but it was clear that certain subject areas were given a higher priority than others (Table 6.1). The home tutors all spoke of the Sets as being reasonably uninteresting for the children and they often rearranged and left things out to suit the child, although, this was mainly amongst the more experienced home tutors. They all felt enormous guilt at leaving something out and tried as much as was possible to complete everything. The Seminar proved to be an excellent meeting point for discussions about this topic and many stories were swapped amongst the group.

Table 5.1: Approximate Weekly Time Allocation per Subject

Subject	Time/week approximately
Oral language	75 minutes
Silent reading	50 minutes
Language	300 minutes
Creative writing	200 minutes
Handwriting practice	100 minutes
Mathematics	200 minutes
Art/craft	75 minutes
Science, Social Studies, Music	60 minutes each
Physical Education	90 minutes

Source: Adapted from KalSOTA Home Tutor's Guide (no date)

Parents and teachers at KalSOTA valued curriculum areas such as the Arts. They felt that they provided opportunities for children to express their perceptions, feelings, knowledge and values. Many of the 'air lessons' incorporated the Arts areas by linking to the themes in print based materials. Teachers indicated that although the level of value placed on the Arts varied from family to family, with the introduction of the new Curriculum Framework

(Curriculum Council, 1998) parents were increasingly requesting a more integrated curriculum that included the Arts. Parents articulated a need for a more wholistic approach to the curriculum that catered for childrens' social development and well being through the exploration of the world through meaningful Arts experiences. The lack of resources to assist home tutors often meant that provision in this Key Learning Area was limited.

Parents at KalSOTA complained that they often did not have enough time to undertake other curriculum activities. The emphasis on the Set work meant that anything else beyond this often had a lower priority. The race to complete work or catch up on Set work relegated Arts experiences in particular to being left out. Little time was specifically allocated to art or music although the new Early Childhood Curriculum has the Arts integrated throughout the Set. Some parents were trialing the new package and although one found the Arts activities were interesting for the children she had a keen interest and was highly motivated in including them. Others indicated that they often skipped the Arts experiences as they got in the way of learning. Other parents were sick of doing the same activities and especially when they made the '*glider*' with all of their children. Some of the activities seemed to be considered repetitive and lacked meaning. Another reason was that some parents felt they were not creative enough, lacked confidence and had a perceived low ability in the area.

Many of the parents had more than one child learning through KalSOTA and in one instance, four children. This made schooling hectic and tiring. Once the morning had been managed there was little energy to participate beyond the essential work of the sets. Many of the parents felt that they had to have time to

be mum as well and besides the afternoons tended to be used for catching up on household, business or station commitments.

Another issue seemed to be exposure to a range of arts. Art was the one area that seemed to get the most attention although music was also available to the children. Parents did not think that the children had enough exposure to a variety of arts forms and the lack of variety and possibilities to attend arts experiences also made inspiration to be creative difficult.

Home tutors felt similarly about science and computing. They wanted to be able to provide more support to their children in these areas but were either not confident or lacked suitable resources. They relied on the class teacher for assistance but they were not always able to resolve the issue of access or resourcing in these areas. Mostly home tutors did not have time. They completed the Set work, which they viewed as required and anything beyond that was on the whole not included.

The home tutor at KalSOTA was well supported and communication between teachers and home tutors was excellent. The home tutors were committed to achieving the outcomes as prescribed in the Sets. They were busy people and managed the job of home tutor amongst others. They have little time for extras, and while a range of curriculum areas were highly valued by teachers and home tutors they were often left out. There were opportunities for children to participate in art and music and home tutors said that they would like to see this expanded and to include more opportunities for exposure to a variety of arts experiences. On the whole the home tutors did not feel confident or creative enough to tackle the Arts, computers or Science. This was not true of all home tutors and some had expertise or a keen interest in these areas.

Teachers and home tutors described the lack of resources as being a real issue and one that needed to be addressed especially as the Curriculum framework (CCWA, 1998) was being introduced.

CASE STUDY NO. 4: PORT HEDLAND SCHOOL OF THE AIR

Port Hedland is located on the north west coast of Western Australia. Five years after MSOTA was established the Port Hedland School of the Air (PHSOTA) was on the airwaves and began transmitting in 1964. The first lesson by HF radio was delivered on 7th September of that year. In October 1998, Port Hedland became the first SOTA to share facilities with the RFDS. The joint facility was completed in 1998 and is located at the Port Hedland International Airport. The two organisations have traditionally had a very strong relationship with a common clientele.

During 2000 PHSOTA had an enrolment of 44 students. There were 19 female students and 25 male students, and of these 10 were indigenous students and 7 had English as their second language. In 2000 there were 6 staff including the principal and a registrar who was also the library officer. The students lived at a variety of different locations, widely scattered throughout the Pilbara. Amongst the SOTAs, PHSOTA has the second largest district, covering an area of 560,000 square kilometres (see Map 5.1).

Like other SOTAs the curriculum is based on the Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998) and is supported by other documents published by SIDE and PHSOTA. In 2000 a wide range of curricula areas were presented to the students and included art, music, language, mathematics, social studies, science and Languages Other than English (LOTE). The teachers at PHSOTA

were organized in class groups and responsible for a number of similar aged children, although, at times there was crossover especially when teachers visited families. Teachers worked directly with the home tutors (or governesses), who were mostly mothers. Few fathers undertake the role of home tutor although they are at times involved. The children were essentially isolated and lived for considerable periods of time without contact with their peers. For some families it is an irritation that they cannot meet more frequently.

Life in the Pilbara is for most not completely isolated from the external world. All have access to either telephone, facsimile, television, Internet and email and some to satellite. PHSOTA was also the first school in the state to be installed with an intranet system, which allows students to email the school and download information from the Internet. There was some concern reported by parents that they found the service variable and reported the 'slowness' of the system. The issues of adequate infrastructure to access the service was of considerable debate and noted by PHSOTA. PHSOTA also houses a satellite receiver, which supports its role as a Westlink Centre for the town.

Children gained access to the broadcasts through the HF radios, which were supplied by the PHSOTA if they did not have one of their own. The radios were 100watt Codan and Barrett transceivers, with either Broadband, Helical Dipole or Long Line aerials. The school also supplied computers for students who needed them. The level of access at this SOTA was high. The use of facsimile seemed to be frequent and many parents indicated that this was often the fastest way to receive feedback and support. Children, parents and their teachers communicated daily through the HF radio, which was at the time

maintained by the Royal Flying Doctors Service. The HF radio is linked to transmitters, located at Port Hedland Airport and transceivers at Pippingarra Station, approximately twenty kilometres to the east.

Parents undertook the role of home tutor with considerable seriousness. They organized their schoolrooms and in some cases had separate spaces dedicated to schooling. Again, this depended on space. Parents received dispatches twice a year from PHSOTA that included a half years' work each. These were sent out in Term 2 and Term 4. The correspondence sets were intended to cover around ten days worth of work although some subject areas are not adequately catered for and School of the Air material supplemented these. Some parents developed individual timetables based around lifestyle decisions. However, most parents organized the daily schooling around broadcast lessons as they felt these tended to introduce new ideas and support the correspondence materials from SIDE. Many parents found this useful, as they often did not understand concepts in the Sets and contact through the broadcasts helped to clarify what was required. Some parents found the turnaround time for correcting the Sets was often slow and although they mostly received work within a month of sending it in they had often moved onto the next Set and the previous one was forgotten.

The materials supplied by PHSOTA to parents in *The Welcome Book* (PHSOTA, 1997) provided guidelines and suggestions on how to function effectively as the home tutor. It suggested that a timetable be established to encourage routines and to help with discipline of both the child and the parent, and further, that sufficient time was allowed to complete work. As a guide five hours each day, five days a week, was suggested to cover the work. Parents

might be able to get through the work more quickly if they only had one or two children to supervise. This SOTA provided a table, which detailed how much time in minutes should be dedicated to various curriculum areas based on the Beazley Report (1985, cited in *The Welcome Book*, PHSOTA, 1997). There was also an emphasis on covering all subject areas not just math's and language, as a timetable would be "sadly deficient as pointed out strongly in the Beazley Report" (cited in *The Welcome Book*, PHSOTA, 1997 [no page number]).

PHSOTA had an energetic and lively staff and parent group. They attended several camps throughout the year to encourage social contact amongst the children and each other. Mini camps were often held at stations within the school catchment area and children in the higher grades could elect to attend the annual combined SOTA camp at Point Peron, south of Perth. Along with the broadcasts, camps provided times for some children and parents to meet and discuss issues related to schooling. Commitment to attending the camps was high although at times climatic conditions made this impossible. Roads could be washed out, cars would break down and some stations were completely 'cut off' and thereby making access impossible. As an example, the researcher observed that one family chartered a plane using the state allowance to attend the first camp of the year 'Seminar'. This was the only way in which the family could attend as a flooded creek had isolated the station owner with her car on one side and she on the other. This parent felt it was very important that her children attend the Seminar and went out of her way to ensure that they did. A further consideration for this parent was the need for some '*other company*' and especially '*female company*'.

The stated aim of the school was to ensure the educational progress of children enrolled and to work with the parents together as a team. This was demonstrated in various ways. The parent body contributed to school governance through partaking in the School Decision Making Group. This group was made up of representatives of the parents and staff who together decide strategic direction for the school. PHSOTA also holds P & C meetings on the radio, which provides strong support to the school and its students. Parents reported that visits *'by the teacher were important and that they looked forward to those occasions'*. Teachers at PHSOTA were committed to visiting students where they could. Materials also highlighted that parents needed strategies for the schoolroom and resources were required in order to manage difficult behaviour, for keeping children on task and to manage interruptions. Interruptions were detailed as a cause for concern. The telephone, facsimile and visitors constantly interrupted routines. Further, although schooling was considered important, lifestyle often impacted on timetables. Parents complained of not having enough support within the family. That it was hard to say what support they actually needed and that at times being mother and general *'do everything about the house'* as well as home tutor was hard work. Others indicated that it didn't necessarily stop with managing the house and they were often required to do the bookwork and help out on the property as well.

The learning program at PHSOTA was varied and while the core areas such as Literacy had a higher proportion of resources and time allocated to them parents were encouraged to engage with the whole school curriculum. The Sets for the early years provided a more integrated approach the

curriculum and art, drama and music were often interwoven. Despite this many parents said they often skipped stuff like that as it was unnecessary and besides they didn't feel always very confident in what they were asked to do. One parent felt that *'doing a play was just hard work as they didn't have enough people and it seemed a bit made-up and wasted time.*

The principal of this SOTA had an interest in music and provided specific sessions in this area. An art specialist did the same. A specific air lesson was devoted to music and art and children were encouraged to be involved. Parents indicated that they did not always participate in these activities although if their children wanted to and it was convenient they would. Materials from PHSOTA emphasized that the sessions in music and art were provided to support parents who should not see these aspects of the curriculum as extra work. Many parents found the timing of the sessions made it impossible to get involved. The sessions were usually placed outside of the morning sessions and many parents did not insist that their children partake in activities especially in the upper primary levels. Many parents felt that these areas were not as important as others and missed them out. Teachers also indicated that students who did not participate in these areas were not sent resources such as the Art Box.

Younger students tended to attend music sessions on-air and had a repertoire of twenty-four songs. During 2000 sessions were scheduled for a Tuesday morning and developed to include older students who had seven songs in their repertoire from the Australian Broadcasting Commission 'Sing' Book. Although attendance was erratic those who did join in found the sessions to be fun and interesting. The school also hosted a Bush dance at one of their camps and held music and dance workshops at Seminar.

One parent had particular strengths in the area of art and was at times called upon but this was infrequent. She maintained a considerable amount of curriculum time in the area for her children due to her own interest. Few families engaged in drama and teachers at PHSOTA felt that art and music were more successful as they had complementary radio sessions. Few parents requested more in these areas although occasionally a parent had requested music lessons.

The home tutor role is a multipart job for the parents at Port Hedland School of the Air. Like other SOTAs success was varied and home tutors relied on support from teachers and friends. The schoolroom was an orderly place with a timetable that gave consideration to breadth and shared curriculum allocation. An inclusive curriculum is highly valued, but although the principal and staff encouraged parents to get their children involved this was patchy. Parents were committed to the education of their child but the reality of station life often meant that subject areas such as the Arts just did not feature highly. School routines tended to be completed by lunchtime and any extra school work was viewed as '*getting in the way*' or '*it was hard enough getting kids to work all morning let alone sign on for extra stuff*'. Many home tutors were grateful that their kids basically got on with the Sets, which were often very boring.

Curriculum areas that fell outside of the Sets were not a priority for some parents and they did not feel it was necessary to include them. The lack of suitable resources and support for parents located other curriculum areas such as Science, LOTE, Physical education along with the Arts as sessions for those who might be interested at camps. Teachers found these area difficult to

manage although they wanted to be more involved and while PHSOTA provided opportunities these were limited due to the teachers' own lack of resources and the complexity of delivering some curriculum areas through radio broadcast sessions.

CASE STUDY NO. 5: SCHOOL OF ISOLATED AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) is the centre for distance learning within the Department of Education, Western Australia. The formation of SIDE resulted from the amalgamation of the Distance Education Centre and the five SOTAs in 1995. Previously the Distance Education Centre (DEC) had not included the Schools of the Air. SIDE is made up of six campuses. These include the five SOTAs and the Leederville site in Perth that constitutes Preparatory [P-5], Middle [6-10] and Post Compulsory [11-12] Schools.

Overall, a director who manages the six campuses leads the School. A team of Principals and Managers who coordinate specific areas in turn assist him. The school has a large and diverse student population ranging from Pre-primary to Year 12. The students must meet Department of Education guidelines to enrol through SIDE. The students include:

- full time students unable to attend a conventional school due to geographical isolation
- WA students travelling Australia or the world, on a long term basis, with their parents

- WA students whose local high school does not offer the subjects they wish to study, or where the timetable does not allow them to join the class
- students suffering from long-term illnesses.

One reason for amalgamating the DEC with SOTAs was to provide an integrated, exciting and responsive system for the delivery of education to students in geographically isolated locations. Since 1940 and the introduction of radio broadcasts SIDE has quickly moved into exploring new technologies for a more efficient delivery of schooling. During 2000 there were 1,500 students studying through SIDE. Access and equity for all students has become for Western Australia an issue over recent years. The enormity of Western Australia, and the relatively small population makes the delivery of education to a small number of Western Australians who must live in isolated locations expensive. However, the introduction of telecommunications for education purposes over the past few years has enabled SIDE to provide for some children access to a range of teaching and learning technologies. Introduction of a range of telecommunications strategies means that most children have access to a computer, telephone, facsimile and Internet connections.

Overall the new technologies are being used to:

reduce the distance aspect of distance education so that students are learning in a teaching environment similar to the classroom. In addition, these technologies can provide access to information services and support research and inquiry from any remote location that has a computer,

modem and a telephone connection. Alternative delivery systems involve the transmission of voice, data or images using a satellite, microwave or terrestrial mechanism. Generally there is no particular technology that is eminently suited for educational purposes, and a mix of telephone, electronic and voice mail, audio teleconferencing, teletext, radio, audio graphics, television, facsimile and videoconferencing is used according to location and circumstances (SIDE, 2001, *The SIDE Story*, Telstracomunications ¶4).

SIDE has been innovative and embracing of new technologies. However, the infrastructure for those students settled in remote locations does not always support the available teaching and learning experience. Ongoing discussion and debate is had with the national Telecommunications provider (Telstra) regarding infrastructure issues. The enormous distances mean that the cost of laying microcable and updating telephone lines is an expense that cannot be recovered from the small population across rural and remote Western Australia. Infrastructure is an ongoing and topical issue that is frustrating for many families.

SIDE has a clear and simple mission: to improve learning outcomes (understanding, skills and values) through the development and provision of quality educational services and opportunities for isolated students (SIDE, 2001, *Inside SIDE* ¶3). SIDE achieves its mission by offering of a range of programs for students at various levels of schooling from Kindergarten to Post-Compulsory TEE and vocational options. There is ongoing development of

written and audio visual materials along with kits to accompany many of the courses (ie. Art Box). SIDE also houses a library and resource collection.

SIDE is committed to providing quality education for all of the students enrolled through any of the sites in Western Australia. Their curriculum is in compliance with the requirements of the Department of Education, Western Australia and currently the Curriculum Framework is being implemented across all learning areas. SIDE has a group of curriculum writers who have been seconded from schools throughout the state. The writers revise and develop new correspondence materials for all levels of the distance materials provided. Traditionally the core subject areas such as mathematics, English and writing have had the main focus in the primary curriculum materials. There is, however, a range of other subject areas that include science and social studies built into the Set structure. Recent developments in the Early Childhood curriculum have seen the integration of all subject areas rather than the usual discipline based approach. At the secondary level a full range of subjects is available. Students can as of 2002 select from a list of 30 options for TEE. In the Arts fine art, photography and some media subjects are available. As yet, there are no options for music or drama. Alternatively students can enrol in the Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB) practical and theoretical music examinations.

SIDE values the contribution that a breadth of curriculum offers children but there is keen competition for resources amongst all of the Key Learning areas of the Curriculum Framework. So, there is a tendency to provide in the Primary Level an adequate amount of resources in all areas but at the Middle

and Secondary School Level resources are usually more limited and the focus has traditionally been on literacy and numeracy.

Of further irritation is the decision that those in responsibility at the sites often have to make about staffing. Deciding which specialist to incorporate within the staffing formulas is frustrating and fraught with difficulty as it is not possible to have a specialist in every area. Some sites have been more strategic than others and have had a specialist science teacher one year and then a specialist physical education teacher the following year. Finding a specialist teacher to relocate to the sites becomes another issue. There is a lot of pressure from families who are increasingly requesting a broader range of curriculum areas and presume that offerings through distance education will be the same as for conventional settings. This may in part be due to the introduction of the Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998). SIDE is attempting to address curriculum diversity by integrating the Key Learning Areas into print materials and then provide in-servicing and training for them at camps or the annual Seminars in the case of the SOTAs.

Print materials receive ongoing development and revision; however, there are many instances where parents have been confused by what is required or choose to disregard aspects of the Sets. SIDE has systems for encouraging parents to be more involved in the development of curriculum materials and has sent curriculum writers to the remote stations to see how the home tutor manages the materials. This also serves to provide the writer with a 'snapshot' of what the teaching and learning environment and conditions are going to be. SIDE usually forms smaller reference groups and trials new Sets with volunteer groups of parents before making Sets mandatory. Although, this

system encourages parent participation many of the parents felt that not enough of this was done and found communication with the writers was still not good enough. Parents felt that the writers did not always understand or appreciate the conditions under which they worked.

The writers at SIDE are quite isolated from the teaching sections at the Leederville site. Some staff indicated that they often do not communicate with each other very effectively. The writers are often seconded from around the state, do not communicate with the teachers at SIDE and the researcher formed the impression that open communication between sections was not always occurring. Teachers were to be found at the 'teaching sites' and the curriculum writers were contained as part of the overall administrative structure of SIDE that is not a teaching site. However, specialist teachers are a brief walk across the courtyard. Some teachers had had positive experiences with managers who allowed them to work with the writers but other managers were not as open to such collaboration. At another level of the organization the separation of the curriculum writers was deliberate and purposeful as teachers and experts were often felt to be stale and used to doing things in the same way. It was reported that these teachers could be at times 'stale'. Curriculum writers were recruited on merit and were full of 'new' ideas.

Teachers often felt that the writers did their own thing and later as the teacher they would have to sort it out with the kids. This was most apparent in specialist areas. It seemed that it would be appropriate to consult specialist teachers who worked in other sections before making decisions in areas that saw the Arts often used as a 'frill' in the print based materials. The Arts were often slotted in to make the work more interesting but little real skill

development or true understanding of the Arts seemed to be considered. Some staff found this insulting to their expertise.

One of the pervading issues that SIDE teachers acknowledge is that parents often decide what will or will not be completed. This means they often leave out anything that looks a waste of time or not particularly important. Activities that lay outside the usual literacy or numeracy areas often are ignored. SIDE is hoping that with the integration of the Key Learning Areas into the Sets that home tutors will have to engage with all of the curriculum areas. Teachers will be more attentive to the tasks and be able to provide more support for more difficult learning areas. At the moment interaction with teachers is a choice that parents make but children enrolled at SOTAs are in a unique position where they can have frequent contact with their teachers. Some teachers and home tutors feel that there is increased opportunity for more support from the class teacher in comparison to students in conventional school settings

Parents also tend to get used to certain ways of doing things and when changes occur can be quite vocal about what they want and do not want. There is at times some resistance to change and home tutors can be quite 'stubborn' about what will and will not work for their children; this can cause upset and confusion for home tutors and the children. Vital information about changes in state policy and implementation for policy need to be communicated carefully and with regard to how the home tutors will manage new responsibilities.

Parents who are members of the Isolated ICPA frequently negotiate with SIDE for changes and inclusions to curriculum. They are a keen group and who have significant lobbying power across the state of Western Australia and

nationally. They lobby on a range of issues that concern the education of their children. This can at times be difficult for SIDE and communication between the various sites and managers a particular challenge.

Isolation does shape the character of education provision in Western Australia. SIDE acknowledges this and it is accurate to say that children will not receive a 'conventional education' through SIDE, comparable with that in urban settings. In distance education the home tutors take a critical role in the success of the schooling experience. They are sometimes but not always specialists in the full range of curriculum areas. They require support and adequate resources. The curriculum writers do need to ensure that they understand the context in which families and children are working in order to appreciate the complexities of being a home tutor. Communication is important in all of the interactions and the fluidity of interactions across the sites with writers, teachers and parents is significant.