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### An Exploration of Preservice Teachers' Readiness for Teaching in Rural and Remote Schools

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#### Abstract

Preparing teachers for rural and remote (RR) schools in Australia appears to be an ongoing issue with many schools continuing to experience staff shortages. This research aimed to understand preservice teachers' ( $n=23$ ) perceptions of their readiness for teaching in RR schools within four theoretical constructs, namely: self, classroom, school, and community. Following a RR professional experience, preservice teachers completed a literature-based Likert scale survey with written response questions to investigate their readiness for teaching in RR communities within the four constructs. Results showed that more than 80% of participants indicated self-readiness for teaching; yet, work recognition (70%), discussing career goals (65%), and having wellbeing supported (61%) had lower percentages. Classroom readiness was indicated by 83% or more of the preservice teachers for seven of the eight items; however, less than half claimed they had trust in the leadership for school readiness. Community readiness had percentages lower than 80% across the eight associated items. The results suggested preservice teachers can be supported during professional experience to promote teaching in RR contexts as a way to overcome teacher shortages.

**Keywords:** rural, remote, preparing teachers, preservice teachers

#### Introduction

Shortages of teachers willing to teach in rural and remote areas (RR) of Australia has been an ongoing issue for decades (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Reid, 2017). One in forty Australians live in remote or very remote areas so ensuring students living in such locations have equitable access to a high-quality education is imperative (Halsey, 2018; Young & Kennedy, 2011). While there are incentives for teachers to move to RR areas that include extended holidays, additional salary, reimbursement of removalist costs, and potential for promotion, these approaches fall short in producing sustainable solutions (Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Young, Grainger & James, 2018). Further strategies to encourage teachers to locate to RR communities have focussed on preparing preservice teachers with opportunities to undertake professional experiences in RR schools. Such approaches have deemed to support preservice teachers' decisions about teaching in RR locations upon graduation (Gregson, Waters, & Grupetta, 2006; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Young et al. 2018). Indeed, opportunities to undertake professional experiences in RR locations need to be harnessed to ensure preservice teachers are 'ready' for teaching in such settings. This paper explores a model of readiness for teaching in the hope that

those supporting preservice teachers during professional experience may guide them with the opportunities to potentially be self-ready, classroom ready, school ready, and community ready for teaching in RR contexts.

### Literature Review

A comparative analysis of Australian, Canadian and New Zealand RR schools shows inadequate educational opportunities for school students (Sullivan, McConney, & Perry, 2018). Sullivan et al. (2018) state that “*Rural school principals in Australia are most likely among the three countries to report that shortages of teaching personnel hinder learning*” (p. 1). Attracting teachers to RR locations continues to be an issue for staffing in Australian schools (Campbell & Yates, 2011; Young et al., 2018). Universities and departments of education have developed innovative programs designed to encourage preservice teachers’ exploration of professional experiences in rural and remote schools. Programs such as the *Coast to Country* project (Young et al., 2018), *Over the Hill* (Hudson & Hudson, 2008), *Beyond the Line* (Gregson et al., 2006), and *Beyond the Range* (Queensland Department of Education, 2018) have provided preservice teachers with funded authentic RR professional experiences. These RR teaching experiences have had positive effects on preservice teachers’ willingness to teach in rural areas (Hudson & Hudson, 2019).

Reviews such as the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey, 2018) endorse the need to provide quality education for students attending RR schools. Recommendations of the Review include: the development of programs for supporting students to experience high quality learning in a changing world; ensuring quality educators and school leaders for RR schools; and the development of embedded review for continuous school growth and improvement (p. 3). A reoccurring theme of this Review is the need to attract high performing teachers to RR schools.

Despite innovative programs developed by universities and education departments and the recommendations from reviews such as those presented by Halsey (2018), the uptake of teachers willing to locate to RR schools remains inadequate to meet the ongoing demands of staffing in Australia. This may be influenced by insufficient programs and funding emanating from universities that promote RR teaching. Another reason might include the need to build the capacity of preservice teachers through effective curriculum focussed on teaching in RR schools and readiness models designed to support and engage preservice teachers in RR contexts.

The development of teacher readiness for engagement in RR schools has often been addressed through a particularly sociological lens. For instance, Campbell and Yates (2011) explore the concept of metrocentricity within teacher education, proposing that, “*the notion that traditional teacher education is unlikely to produce individuals attuned to the needs of rural and country education is a thesis often articulated*” (p. 3). Many universities are situated in metropolitan regions of Australia. For countless preservice teachers they have not experienced visiting, living, or working in a RR location so do not have an understanding of teaching in such schools. Many preservice teachers complete their professional experience placements in metropolitan schools hence, it is suggested that universities are preparing preservice teachers for such classrooms (Campbell & Yates, 2011). While preservice teachers can make assumptions about the resources, the community, and students, they cannot truly understand the difference between teaching in a metro and RR school without being exposed or educated.

White and Reid (2008) confirm the predominantly metrocentric focus of teacher education. They highlight the need for providers of initial teacher education to develop curricula that supports preservice teachers’ understandings for teaching in RR communities, and the influence of the community or ‘place’ on classroom pedagogy. They advocate that such curricula will better support preservice teachers to be ready to teach beyond the metrocentric classroom. Halsey (2006) confirms that universities need to better prepare preservice teachers for RR contexts. He suggests the preparation focus on three domains: personal, professional, and public. Personal being an understanding of what it means to live in an RR community; professional being

prepared for what can be at times challenging and complex teaching spaces and; public which is preparation for the visibility of teachers living in RR contexts.

The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (Craven, Beswick, Fleming, Fletcher, Green, & Rickards, 2014) highlight that preservice teachers need to be ‘classroom ready’ upon graduation. However, readiness for teaching in RR schools is influenced by many factors. As emphasised in the above discussion teaching is contextual. Metro schools by all accounts will be different to RR schools. White and Reid (2008) contend the importance of ‘place’ and how community and location can impact on the pedagogies adopted in the classroom. Halsey (2006) suggests the very nature of RR schools will mean graduates will need to be aware of the personal, professional, and public personas required for teaching in a RR school. Indeed, school contexts will vary and despite their teacher preparation program; graduate teachers may find themselves in very unfamiliar teaching contexts. Regardless of calls for preservice teacher classroom readiness, in reality the preparation for teaching extends beyond the classroom, particularly in preparing teachers for RR contexts (White & Kline, 2012). The following literature outlines that readiness for teaching in RR contexts encompasses more than just the ‘classroom’ and presents four constructs to support preservice teachers to be ready for teaching. They include: self-ready, classroom ready, school ready, and community ready.

### *Self-Ready*

Teachers and preservice teachers undertake a continual cycle of reflection and review to develop their pedagogical practices. An essential component of their preparation includes being self-ready: psychologically, socially, and physically. Many researchers (e.g., Acton & Glasgow, 2015; McCallum, Price, Graham, & Morrison, 2017) and psychological studies (Paterson & Grantham, 2016; Raea, Cowellb, & Field, 2017; Wigford & Higgins, 2019) have highlighted the relevance of teacher wellbeing, which can be linked to self-readiness. Others (McCallum et al., 2017) outline factors that connect wellbeing to resilience, self-efficacy, social emotional competence, and emotional intelligence, with negative personal effects of teachers’ work eliciting burnout, fatigue, exhaustion, and stress. In this current study, self-readiness includes wellbeing, self-efficacy, the psychological state, and a sense of belonging and connectedness, as without a positive sense of self, other components of teaching may be compromised.

Part of developing a positive self is within the psychological state that may be attained through positive work experiences. These experiences include interactions with members of the school community towards achieving belonging and connectedness, and affirmative teaching practices and work recognition for developing a positive professional identity (Andrews, 2011). Andrews (2011) suggests that teachers (and preservice teachers) can be positively reinforced when others comment favourably on their teaching practices. In most cases, teachers and preservice teachers receive work recognition directly from students in the classroom (Berber, 2015). At the classroom level and possibly linked to the psychological state, school students who provide gratitude for their learning can motivate and inspire teachers to excel in their practices (Mahipalan & Sheena, 2018). Work recognition emanating from colleagues, school executives, and the parent community can also boost teacher confidence (Andrews, 2011).

Professionals living in RR areas may feel a sense of isolation, being away from friends and loved ones (Irving, Sort, Gwynne, Tennant, & Blinkhor, 2017); hence, there is a need to establish a sense of belonging and connectedness (e.g., social connectedness), contributing to resilience for living in RR areas. Belonging may be noted as a “*psychological sense of school membership [where people] feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment*” (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Social connectedness encompasses positive relationships within the workplace along with how individuals feel about their workplace (Barber & Schluterman, 2008), which seems to apply to a wide range of contexts, including rural and remote (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013), ethnic groups (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016), and various people in schools (e.g., students, staff, parents; Barber & Schluterman, 2008). For decades, researchers (e.g., Gizir, 2019; Goodenow, 1993; Gummadam et al., 2016) have written

about school students' sense of belonging with strong commitments to the school and opportunities to build self-esteem through successful engagement in school activities. It is argued that the same opportunities of belonging and connectedness need to be afforded to teachers and preservice teachers. An Australian qualitative study (Bower, van Kraayenoord, & Carroll, 2015) indicated four strategy areas that may help to facilitate social connectedness for students, namely: helping individuals to connect, at the classroom level, at a school level, and with the broader community. These strategies also align with the model proposed in the current study for teachers and preservice teachers around self, classroom, school and community.

### *Classroom Ready*

The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group ([TEMAG], Craven et al., 2014) outlines the need for preservice teachers to be classroom ready. Indeed, the preparedness for teaching in the classroom is the fundamental work of teachers. Developing pedagogical knowledge practices can help build a preservice teacher's identity and a sense of self efficacy when successfully enacted (Hudson, 2013). Preservice teachers are learning how to prepare lessons for the classroom and require experienced guidance and critical insights for advancing their practices (Sahin-Taskin, 2017). The mentor teacher has a key role in supporting the preservice teacher's readiness for teaching during professional experience, particularly with knowledge of the classroom context, curriculum and resources. Importantly, the mentor teacher can suggest pedagogical knowledge practices that are most suitable to the specific classroom context, including planning, preparation, teaching strategies, questioning techniques, classroom management, and assessment processes (Bird & Hudson, 2015). Behaviour management is a major concern for many early-career teachers (preservice teachers and beginning teachers) and one of the reasons teachers leave the profession in the first five years (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Mentor teachers can guide and support the preservice teacher as they develop the skills for managing the classroom. As a linchpin for teacher development in the classroom, the relationship between the mentor teacher and mentee (preservice teacher) can help facilitate effective teaching (Baeten & Simons, 2016). The mentor can enhance the educative processes for the mentee by engaging in reflective practices and guiding their readiness for classroom teaching (Mathew & Peechattu, 2017). To enhance the mentor teacher's skills for supporting preservice teachers to be classroom ready, it is advocated that "*mentor teachers receiving adequate training would be better prepared and have more effective impact on preservice teachers' professional development*" (Izadinia, 2015, p. 8).

### *School Ready*

Schools are complex organisations, with considerable policies and procedures that can challenge anyone working in such environments (Butt, 2016). Induction programs are advocated for beginning teachers to educate around policies, procedures, practices, and staff roles and responsibilities (Wexler, 2019). Preservice teachers may also experience an induction, usually presented by the mentor teacher or leadership team who can aid an understanding about the operations within a school (e.g., Nallaya, 2016). Comprehensive induction programs emanate from sound leadership, particularly in establishing a positive school culture and understanding effective ways of working within the school environment (Morris, Lummis, Lock, Ferguson, Hill, & Nykiel, 2019). For example, educating a preservice teacher about the special programs in the school (e.g., English as an Additional Language [EAL], learning support, behaviour support), how the curriculum is enacted at the school and school-wide programs such as behaviour management approaches may facilitate school readiness.

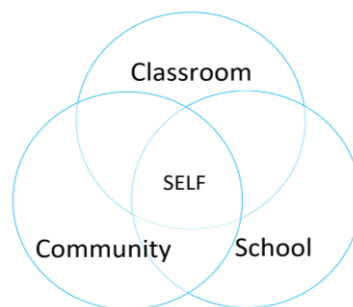
### *Community Ready*

Being community ready entails understanding the community, their demographics, culture, strengths and weaknesses, and ways in which the community may support the school environment (White & Kline, 2012). The community or 'place' influences the school and there is evidence to suggest that teachers in RR contexts need to be 'place conscious' and adopt 'place

responsive pedagogies' (White & Reid, 2008). Community involvement with schools can increase student outcomes towards success (Newchurch, 2017) and teacher-parent/carer relationships play an important role. These relationships may come in a variety of forms that could lead to reducing behaviour issues, increasing academic success, and lifting social and emotional competence (Webster-Stratton & Bywater, 2015). Understanding parent/carer roles and expectations through formal and informal events and meetings can enhance RR community relationships (Bofferding, Kastberg, & Hoffman, 2016). Additionally, there will be key figures and members of the community who can provide insight and greater understanding. Inviting community speakers to school events and calling upon their expertise helps the school to remain community connected and responsive. University coursework may have difficulty delivering real-world contexts for understanding a RR community, especially as each school is unique with its own set of demographics and skills (Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde, & Mutton, 2018). Understanding the place and the role of the community when teaching in RR schools can provide insights into the culture of the community and can influence approaches to teaching. Professional experiences can support preservice teachers' understandings about a school community if purposefully embedded and discussed during the experience.

### Conceptual Framework

This current study investigates preservice teachers' readiness for teaching in RR schools using a survey design with written responses. Currently, there appears to be no instrument in the literature that attempts to measure teacher readiness across these constructs. However, it is evident from the literature that to be ready to teach in RR schools requires preservice teachers to be self ready, classroom ready, school ready, and community ready. This research adheres to the principles of survey design outlined by Hittleman and Simon (2006) that advocates when designing survey items avoid: jargon, double-barrelled questions, ambiguity, and bias. A conceptual framework previously outlined (Hudson & Hudson, 2019) was used in this current research to further investigate preservice teachers' readiness for teaching with a stronger focus on the four constructs (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: A Model of Teaching Readiness: Self, Classroom, School, and Community**

### Method

This small-scale quantitative study aimed to understand preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness for rural and remote teaching around four constructs (i.e., self, classroom, school, and community). This number of participants ( $n=23$ ) is recognised as a limitation to this research providing a snap-shot of preservice teachers' perceptions. It employs a five-part Likert scale survey with additional written responses pertaining to their experiences in RR schools and their preparedness for teaching. University ethics approvals were provided with data collected remaining confidential and anonymous. Survey data were gathered through a literature-based devised instrument across the four constructs: self, classroom, school, and community (see Appendix).

The survey had two sections. The first section included demographics (gender, age, degree program, school student enrolment, professional experience duration, and grades taught with

approximate lessons per week) and three broad questions for written responses: 1) Do you envisage yourself teaching in a rural and remote school when you graduate from university? Why or why not?; 2) What are your thoughts about teaching in rural and remote schools?; and 3) What are the three most important pieces of advice you would give to other preservice teachers about teaching in rural and remote schools? The second section (see Appendix) focused on 32 items with a distribution of 8 items per construct, linked to the literature. Preservice teachers who were associated with two universities were invited to complete the survey following their RR professional experience. Participants had a choice to complete the survey online or have a hard copy of the survey once they returned to university. The survey commenced with the statement, “*In my readiness for teaching (related to my last professional experience), I believe I...*” Preservice teachers then circled their response by indicating if they: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D); Uncertain (U), Agree (A) or Strongly Agree (SA) with the item on the survey. Research information and consent forms were provided to the preservice teachers to make an informed decision about participating in the research. Submitting the survey online was considered as consent, and as the survey was confidential it could not be retracted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Quantitative data were analysed through SPSS (a statistical analysis software program), providing descriptive statistics (percentages [%], mean scores [M], standard deviations [SD]) for interpretation. The percentage scores represent those preservice teachers who agreed or strongly agreed with the survey items. The written responses were hand-coded and organised and aligned to the four constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of the written responses were to confirm or provide any additional information about the preservice teachers’ experiences. After providing participant demographics, the quantitative data will be reported in four tables representative of the preservice teachers’ responses to the questions corresponding to the four constructs. The discussion of the tables will be combined with the written response data to provide insight into the preservice teachers’ readiness for teaching in a RR school as a result of their professional experience.

## Findings and Discussion

Survey data provided demographics about the preservice teachers involved in a rural and remote teaching placement. Out of the 23 participants, there were 3 males and 20 females with 14 participants aged between 22-29 years, seven between 30-49 years, and two aged over 50 years. One participant was in the first year of the university degree, and two in their second year, while seven were in their third year and 12 in their final year of study. One participant completed a professional upgrade from primary to secondary English teaching. The sizes of the rural and remote schools where the preservice teachers were undertaking their placements varied considerably (i.e., two < 30 enrolments, one between 30-99 enrolments, four between 100-199, five between 200-299, four between 300-499, and seven had enrolments > 500). The professional experiences ranged between 4-10 weeks (seven had 4 weeks, 12 had 5-6 weeks, and four had between 7-10 weeks). There were 14 who had taught more than 11 lessons during the professional experience with six teaching between 6-10 lessons and two teaching less than five lessons. When asked if they envisaged themselves teaching in a rural and remote school, 16 participants either agreed or strongly agreed they would teach in a rural school with seven uncertain and no one disagreeing.

### *Self-Readiness*

Survey data provided an understanding of preservice teachers’ perceptions of their readiness for rural and remote teaching across the four constructs (self, classroom, school, community). There were more than 80% of participants indicating a self-readiness for teaching around workplace belonging, respect from school staff, identifying professional learning for teaching, resilience for teaching, and being able to outline responsibilities for teaching (Table 1). However, work recognition (70%) and discussing career goals (65%) had lower percentages, and only 61% indicated that their wellbeing was supported in the school. Supporting early career teachers’

(preservice teachers and beginning teachers) wellbeing is recognised in the research as being a key factor for reducing attrition from the teaching profession (McCallum et al., 2017). While the majority of the preservice teachers noted they were supported, close to 40% reported they were uncertain or disagreed their wellbeing was supported. To overcome teacher shortages and encourage preservice teachers to commence their careers in RR schools, they need to feel supported during professional experience (Andrews, 2011). Assisting them to set career goals and recognising their contribution to teaching in a RR setting is designed to motivate them for teaching in harder to staff schools (Barber & Schluterman, 2008; Goodenow, 1993). Indeed, school leaders need to consider the experiences of the preservice teachers during professional experience to ascertain if they are encouraging future teachers to teach in RR contexts.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Around Self-Readiness for Teaching**

Self survey item	%*	M	SD
Had a positive sense of workplace belonging	87	4.26	1.25
Received respect from school staff	93	4.52	1.04
Had my wellbeing supported within the school	61	4.04	1.15
Could identify professional learning relevant to my teaching	91	4.52	0.67
Could discuss my career goals with appropriate school staff	65	4.22	1.16
Had developed resilience for teaching	96	4.48	0.59
Can outline my responsibilities for working in the school	83	4.35	0.78
Was provided with sufficient work recognition	70	4.13	1.06

\* Total percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed with each item.

Written responses within the construct of self-readiness indicated positive attitudes towards teaching in RR schools, opportunities for growth, and positive relationships between the preservice teacher and students. One respondent commented that *“I believe it's an incredible opportunity not to be missed. I'm not sure why more students (preservice teachers) are not interested in teaching rural and remote”*. The personal growth perspective was supported by a number of participants and summarised by one who stated, *“I believe teaching within a rural environment is important and provided me with a different perspective. I found the experience of completing my professional experience incredibly interesting and enjoyable”*. Participants also commented on their developing teacher-student relationships. One participant wrote, *“I like that teachers can build relationships with students and get to know them on a personal level”*. Research suggests that relationships with school students can be very affirming and helps to build self-esteem for teaching (Berber, 2015). Positive experiences in RR placements can influence preservice teachers' attitude and professional identities (Andrews, 2011). Indicative of the responses was when one preservice teacher stated, *“beginning my teaching career in rural or remote schools will cement my ability to be diverse, respectful and flexible”*. It was evident they could see the benefits of teaching in a RR schools and envisaged themselves as RR teachers, signalling a sense of self-readiness.

#### Classroom Readiness

The preservice teachers provided information about their readiness for teaching in the classroom (Table 2). Being classroom ready suggests that preservice teachers need to develop the pedagogical knowledge for teaching (e.g., Hudson, 2013). Altogether, 80% or more of the preservice teachers self-reported classroom readiness in seven of the eight items. The percentages indicated a lower score for the modelling of lessons by their mentor teacher (78%,  $SD=1.22$ ) however, the relatively high standard deviation for this item suggested considerable variation in the preservice teachers' responses. Classroom management is often identified as challenging for early-career teachers and a reason for leaving the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond, 2010), however, 96% of the preservice teachers in this study indicated they were ready for classroom management. Similarly, the preservice teachers reported they were

classroom ready to outline the aims for teaching (96%), reflect on their practices (91%) and believed they were an effective teacher (91%) in an RR school (Table 2).

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Around Classroom Readiness for Teaching**

Classroom survey item	%*	M	SD
Had effective classroom management	96	4.13	0.46
Was able to outline the aims for teaching lessons	96	4.52	0.90
Had support from my mentor for developing my teaching practices	87	4.40	1.03
Was able to assess students' learning for improving my teaching	87	4.27	0.92
Planned effectively for teaching, including differentiation	83	4.48	0.90
Was able to reflect effectively on teaching practices	91	4.52	0.67
Was an effective teacher	91	4.35	0.65
Had lessons modelled by my mentor teacher	78	4.13	1.22

\* Total percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed with each item.

The high percentage scores on all items may have been because the preservice teachers believed they were supported by their mentor teacher for developing their teaching practices (87%). The role of the mentor teacher is pivotal during professional experience (Sahin-Taskin, 2017) and it seems the majority of the preservice teachers believed they were supported to be classroom ready for teaching in a RR school. To encourage preservice teachers to consider careers in RR schools they must experience success so they develop the self-efficacy for teaching in such contexts (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; McCallum et al., 2017).

Written responses within the construct of classroom readiness tended to emphasise the positive relationships with school students gained from teaching in a rural or remote school. The preservice teachers noted specific pedagogical practices they were able to develop because they found *“rural schools have smaller classes so you get to really know your students and their community and develop the appropriate pedagogy”*. The preservice teachers' viewpoints varied in regards to behaviour management. While the survey responses highlighted the readiness of preservice teachers with regard to behaviour management, all school contexts are different with one participant noting, *“There are a higher number of behaviour issues and non-attendance which makes it difficult to plan lessons because students are all at different stages in the content because they are away so much”*. Another participant provided advice that represents the universality of addressing behaviour management for preservice teachers:

*Begin everyday fresh. The students we will deal with are very diverse, in their learning and in their behaviours, they need people to show them forgiveness on their bad days. Every day is a fresh day, let them have the chance to show their good side. Don't hold that grudge.*

Generally, both survey items and written responses signified a potential readiness for teaching in the classroom.

#### School Readiness

Schools have different student and staff populations and the programs that are developed are designed to be responsive to students' needs so are often contextually unique. Understanding the school culture and infrastructure can assist preservice teachers to be ready for teaching in that RR school (Butt, 2016). Knowing the various staff and their roles can aid them to gain information from an experienced and knowledgeable person. Having a school induction that includes an orientation and ongoing information about the school will support their readiness for teaching in that particular school setting (Wexler, 2019). In many schools, the orientation is often delivered by the school leadership team. Overall, 70% or more of the preservice teachers agreed or strongly agreed they believed they had school readiness for teaching in seven of the eight items (Table 3).



**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics Around School Readiness for Teaching**

School survey item	%*	M	SD
Understood school protocols	83	4.22	0.80
Had an understanding about the Learning Support Team operations	70	4.00	1.00
Had an understanding of staff and their roles	96	4.48	0.59
Gained an understanding of students' backgrounds	83	4.23	0.96
Understood the school demographics for teaching purposes	87	4.35	0.93
Was able to facilitate collegiality with school staff	96	4.40	0.89
Had trust in the school leadership	48	3.87	1.29
Understood information about the school context	87	4.40	0.72

\* Total percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed with each item.

While the preservice teachers reported they were school ready in most items, only 48% agreed or strongly agreed they had trust in the school leadership. School leadership is important in supporting preservice and beginning teachers to transition to the school context (Morris et al., 2019; Nallaya, 2016). Perhaps many of the leadership teams in the preservice teachers' schools were busy and did not have the opportunity for interaction or, maybe the preservice teachers did not recognise the support provided; either way it appears there needed to be more explicit advice provided.

As anticipated, written responses within the construct of school readiness were varied. Some participants outlined the challenges of rural schools, for example, one participant stated, "You are expected to perform many roles outside of teaching to give opportunity to kids. Teaching skills of established staff lack in comparison to coast or bigger schools due to less available people looking to fill the role", and another reflected that, "I found that there was a lack of collaboration and support between school staff, due to the high staff turnover." Conversely, other participants' perspectives may be indicated with the following statement:

*Personally, I love smaller schools with a great sense of community. I think that as a first-year teacher I will be offered greater support in a rural school. Additionally, I feel that I would have more opportunities and development in a rural school.*

Advice offered by preservice teachers summarise the positive aspects of the school readiness construct and included, "be part of the school and wider community" and "embrace the school and local community". Arguably, the dichotomy of responses reflects the variations of school structures and school communities in RR locations. This results in a range of school experiences for preservice teachers, who concurrently bring their own lived experiences to the teaching placement (Young et al., 2018).

#### Community Readiness

Of the preservice teachers in this study, 20% or more were unsure or disagreed they had community readiness for teaching in RR schools on all of the eight items (Table 4). While 78% agreed or strongly agreed they could articulate connections between the school and community and understand how to work with parents/carers, only about half (52%) noted they had strategies for overcoming difficulties with parents and carers. Additionally, around 40% or more were unsure or disagreed they could establish collaborative partnerships with parents/carers, effectively report to parents/carers and outline community networks for enhancing teaching. It may be that the preservice teachers in this study were focussed on their classroom teaching and did not have opportunities to interact with parents/carers and community members. Nevertheless, understanding the community, working with parents and carers, and utilising expertise within the community are all important practices that will be essential for teaching in RR schools.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics Around Community Readiness for Teaching**

Community survey item	%*	M	SD
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Communicated effectively with parents/carers	74	3.91	0.79
Established/maintained collaborative relationships - parents/carers	61	3.83	0.94
Can articulate connections between community and school	78	4.22	0.78
Can explain the roles of parents/carers in the school	74	4.00	0.74
Can outline community networks for enhancing my teaching	65	4.09	1.00
Can report effectively to parents and careers	61	3.87	0.92
Had strategies for overcoming difficulties with parents/carers	52	3.70	0.88
Understood how to work effectively with parents/carers	78	3.91	0.60

\* Total percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed with each item.

The community incorporates parents and carers (and other professionals) who have an association with the school. In RR contexts, the school is often the centre of the community (Campbell & Yates, 2011) and knowing the parents/carers gives insight into the needs of the students, so teachers can better support their learning and personal growth. Research highlights the importance of parent-teacher interaction in supporting student outcomes (Webster-Stratton & Bywater, 2015). Understanding and knowing parents/carers within the community provides a further understanding of 'place'. White and Reid (2008) highlight the need to understand 'place' in order to be an effective teacher in RR contexts. Mentor teachers at RR schools need to consider how they will further guide preservice teachers to develop skills and understandings to work with the community and have opportunities to interact with parents and carers.

Written responses within the community readiness construct were diverse. For example, one kindergarten preservice teacher was struggling with her role in a rural school, "*the community is vulnerable and disadvantaged and I am struggling not to give up due to lack of acceptance in the community and historical issues with teachers coming in and being bullied out*". The apparent disconnect between staff and the community in this school appeared to be an ongoing issue. However, in other rural schools, most of the preservice teachers seemed to suggest a closer relationship. For instance, one participant indicated teaching in a rural school "*is more intimate and it gives staff more of a chance to make good relationships with all students, families, and the local community*". Teaching in rural communities requires further understandings by teachers as many of these communities are relatively small and the school can be the hub of the community.

Overall, these preservice teachers provided advice to others wanting a rural and remote teaching experience. Importantly, they used words such as "*be positive*", "*be flexible*", "*get involved*" and "*build relationships with the community*". There was also advice around isolation within the rural community, for instance, "*consider strategies to reduce professional isolation*" and "*be prepared to feel somewhat isolated*". As well as two comments to help teachers to make a decision about teaching in a RR school: (1) "*Don't go remote unless you can PROVE that the school will be supportive (capitals included)*" and (2) "*Visit the town before choosing an area, to see if it suits you*".

Across all the written responses was a common theme of relationships. These relationships arose from multiple perspectives including teacher identity, positive relationships with students within a classroom, professional relationships with colleagues and leaders at a school level, and supportive relationships within a rural community. Additionally, the theme of ongoing support for school students and their communities was clearly evident within the written responses. The written response data reaffirms earlier work by Young (2017) who found that the perspectives of preservice teachers include incorporating a fundamental capacity to develop and maintain positive professional relationships with school students both inside and outside of the classroom context, and that preservice teachers possess altruistic motivations for working with young people. It should be noted that out of the 23 preservice teachers involved in a professional experience placement in a rural and remote school, 16 nominated they would teach in a similar school context when they graduated.

## Limitation of the Study

As with any study, this study has limitations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research was small-scale due to a limited number of participants who completed a rural and remote professional experience. Some of the participants had completed only one previous professional experience while others had completed two or three placements. There was also one participant who had not completed any professional experiences previously. Having no or limited previous professional experience would make it difficult to understand the uniqueness of an RR placement and how this particular placement would influence readiness for the four constructs. A further study could include final-year preservice teachers only, as this cohort would have better understandings of how the professional experience influenced readiness of self, classroom, school, and community for teaching in a RR school. The survey instrument with extended responses was based on the literature, however, further research can explore the instrument with a much larger number of participants. Indeed, if multiple Australian states and territories were involved in the study there may be sufficient numbers to assist in validating the instrument statistically. Such research can include structural equation modelling (SEM) with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which may statistically determine survey items that align with each of the constructs.

## Conclusion

Although there were indications of teacher readiness across the four constructs (self, classroom, school, and community), various items will require a stronger focus for supporting preservice teachers in the future, particularly items associated with community readiness (e.g., maintaining community relationships, reporting to parents/carers, and overcoming community difficulties). Specifically, programs that facilitate a RR teaching experience tend to open up prospects for preservice teachers towards gaining insights around school and community engagement. Leadership teams need to ensure they recognise the influence of RR professional experiences on career choices of preservice teachers. Connecting with preservice teachers during professional experience may help leadership teams to overcome and plan staffing for RR schools. Importantly, the survey instrument may aid universities and departments of education in determining preservice teacher readiness for rural and remote teaching across the four constructs (i.e., self, classroom, school, and community). Further data may reveal how universities and departments can more effectively facilitate readiness for teaching. The instrument could also be used for preservice teacher self-reflection on achieving teaching readiness across the four constructs and for determining areas that require development.

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## Survey instrument on Teaching Readiness: Self, Classroom, School, and Community

MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

**Section 1:** There are two sections to this survey about your readiness for teaching. To preserve your anonymity, please write your mother's maiden name or other memorable name above. In this demographics section, please **circle** or write responses that apply to you.

a) What is your gender?                      Male                      Female      Queergender / Non-Binary

b) What is your age?    <21 years              22 - 29yrs              30 - 49yrs              >50yrs

c) Please state your current degree program: \_\_\_\_\_

d) What is your current university year in this degree?

First                      Second                      Third                      Fourth                      Other:

e) What was the student enrolment numbers in your last rural and remote school?

<30              30-99              100-199              200- 299              300-499              >500

f) How many weeks was your last supervised professional experience?

4                      5-6                      7-10                      11 or more

g) What year(s) were you teaching during your last supervised professional experience? (You may circle more than one)

K    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    11    12

h) About how many lessons did you teach per week during your last teaching experience (class or small groups)?              0                      1-5                      6-10                      11-15                      15 or more

i) To what extent do you agree with this statement? "I envisage myself teaching in a rural and remote school when I graduate from university".

Strongly agree              Agree                      Uncertain                      Disagree                      Strongly disagree

\* What are your thoughts about teaching in rural and remote schools? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\* What are the three most important pieces of advice you would give to other preservice teachers about teaching in rural and remote school:

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

## Section 2

**Instructions:** Please indicate the degree to which you disagree or agree with each statement below by **circling only one response** to the right of each statement.

**Key:** SD = Strongly Disagree      D = Disagree      U = Uncertain      A = Agree      SA = Strongly Agree

### In my readiness for teaching (related to my last professional experience), I believe I...

1. Had a positive sense of workplace belonging.	SD	D	U	A	SA
2. Had effective classroom management.	SD	D	U	A	SA
3. Communicated effectively with parents/carers.	SD	D	U	A	SA
4. Received respect from school staff.	SD	D	U	A	SA
5. Established and maintained collaborative relationships with Parents/carers.	SD	D	U	A	SA
6. Understood school protocols.	SD	D	U	A	SA
7. Can articulate connections between community and school.	SD	D	U	A	SA
8. Could discuss my career goals with appropriate school staff.	SD	D	U	A	SA
9. Was able to outline the aims for teaching lessons.	SD	D	U	A	SA
10. Can explain the roles of parents/carers in the school.	SD	D	U	A	SA
11. Had support from my mentor for developing my teaching practices.	SD	D	U	A	SA
12. Had an understanding of staff and their roles (e.g., principal, admin, cleaners).	SD	D	U	A	SA
13. Can outline community networks for enhancing my teaching practices.	SD	D	U	A	SA
14. Was able to assess students' learning for improving my teaching practices.	SD	D	U	A	SA
15. Could outline my responsibilities for working in the school.	SD	D	U	A	SA
16. Planned effectively for teaching, including differentiation.	SD	D	U	A	SA
17. Understood the school demographics for teaching purposes.	SD	D	U	A	SA
18. Understood information about the school context.	SD	D	U	A	SA
19. Had my wellbeing supported within the school.	SD	D	U	A	SA
20. Can report effectively to parents and careers.	SD	D	U	A	SA
21. Was able to reflect effectively on teaching practices.	SD	D	U	A	SA
22. Could identify professional learning relevant to my teaching.	SD	D	U	A	SA
23. Was able to facilitate collegiality with school staff.	SD	D	U	A	SA
24. Had an understanding about the Learning Support Team					



operations.	SD	D	U	A	SA
25. Had developed resilience for teaching.	SD	D	U	A	SA
26. Had strategies for overcoming difficulties with parents/carers.	SD	D	U	A	SA
27. Was an effective teacher.	SD	D	U	A	SA
28. Understood how to work effectively with parents/carers.	SD	D	U	A	SA
29. Had trust in the school leadership.	SD	D	U	A	SA
30. Had lessons modelled by my mentor teacher.	SD	D	U	A	SA
31. Gained a sound understanding about the students' backgrounds.	SD	D	U	A	SA
32. Was provided with sufficient work recognition.	SD	D	U	A	SA

***Thank you for completing the survey***