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Place Consciousness and School Leaders' Intentionality as Partnership Imperatives: Supporting the Recruitment of Quality Graduates in Regional, Rural and Remote Schools

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Abstract

Attracting high quality teachers to regional, rural, and remote locations has been an issue for school communities in Australia. Research has illustrated that innovative initiatives and experiences can change pre-service teachers' attitudes, perspectives and perceptions about regional, rural and remote schools. What is less understood is the contribution of school leaders foregrounding a place consciousness approach to spark pre-service teacher interest in undertaking professional experience placements and possible employment in their RRR schools. This paper shares research findings that identified how Far North Queensland school leaders showcased "their place" with key stakeholders and in particular with pre-service teachers. The findings affirmed notions that school leaders understand the valuable connections between rural, regional and remote pre-service professional experiences and the potentiality for high quality teachers for the long-term. Implications are drawn in relation to how school leaders create partnerships and promote their school place intentionally.

Keywords: *place consciousness, leader intentionality, regional rural remote education, RRR staffing challenges*

Introduction

Attracting high quality teachers to regional, rural, and remote (RRR) locations has been a long-standing priority for Australian school communities (Halsey, 2018). Families living in RRR locations are justified in their demands for equity of access to quality teaching for their children. Likewise, the wider community supports the notion of equity of educational access for all its citizens (Halsey, 2019). While geographical, contextual and cultural differences are inherently attributed to RRR areas of Australia (Kline et al., 2013), acknowledgement of the relationship between

educational performance and geographical location (Herbert, 2020; Roberts & Green, 2013) has seen Australian educational goals prioritise the mitigation of educational disadvantage (Department of Education, 2019; Halsey, 2018; Herbert, 2020). One recommended action outlined the need to encourage high quality teachers to RRR regions and to support them once they are there (Halsey, 2018). Despite such recommendations, RRR schools continue to face challenges in attracting and retaining high quality teachers to their communities.

Quality teaching in RRR schools begins with pre-service teacher education (Downes & Roberts, 2018) and there is a need for explicit links between pre-service teachers and RRR schools (Halsey, 2018). Research has illustrated that innovative RRR initiatives and placement experiences have changed pre-service teachers' attitudes, perspectives and perceptions about the quality of teachers and career opportunities in RRR schools (Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Young et al., 2018).

What is less understood is the role that school leadership plays in supporting pre-service teachers prior to, during and after their RRR experiences (Downes & Roberts, 2018). To investigate this aspect, our research explored the leadership approaches of a group of Far North Queensland high school leaders. More specifically, it looks at the interplay of the school leaders' sense of place consciousness and leadership intentionality as influences on attracting and retaining quality teachers.

The Far North Queensland region marks one of the more geographically dispersed regions of Queensland (and Australia), with the capital city Brisbane over 1500 kilometres away. As a metropolitan centre, Brisbane supports a large proportion of the pre-service initial teacher education population. While many regional areas of Australia can align to metropolitan universities and metropolitan areas in terms of travel distance, access to services, resources and staff (Herbert, 2020), the Far North Queensland region faces geographically-based challenges when addressing school recruitment needs. Attracting high quality teaching staff to RRR regions is a multifaceted recruitment task involving human resources' teams and often involving school leaders (principals and deputy principals) directly. As a response to the staffing needs of Far North Queensland, the high school leaders of this research project reported that their individual and collective contributions to pre-service teacher RRR initiatives, preparation programs and placement opportunities were fundamental. The leadership strategies adopted for their schools' recruitment needs, and more broadly for the Far North Queensland region, were intentionally aimed to successfully attract, support and retain high quality pre-service teachers.

RRR communities are often characterised by a strong sense of place where a school can "*act as an anchor point for community to build around*" (Morrison & Ledger, 2020, p. i). RRR school leaders understand this has implications for sustainable staffing processes that aim at good fit. A good fit based on each contextualised place has not always been a focus for staffing RRR schools. Rather, such an approach contrasts with historical processes for early career staffing, whereby there was a serving-time mentality for RRR appointments prior to being transferred to more desirable metropolitan locations (Hudson & Hudson, 2019).

As a shift away from more traditional staffing paradigms, the Far North Queensland school leaders fostered and strengthened innovative partnerships to share understandings of their place more directly with pre-service teachers. The school leaders explored and developed peer-supported and partnership-powered leadership approaches to attract pre-service teachers to teach in RRR schools (Fluckiger et al., 2014). This paper demonstrates the importance of RRR school leaders leading with intentionality and sharing their place consciousness, as key features of a multidimensional recruitment strategy aimed at attracting and retaining high quality teachers to RRR schools.

Literature Overview

Halsey's (2018) Independent Review into Regional Rural, and Remote Education emphasised that student outcomes are impacted by "*the magnitude of the challenges of achieving the overall lift given the demographics, geography and cultural diversity of RRR Australia*" (p. 11). Attracting, supporting and retaining high quality teachers to RRR locations is a national educational priority (Department of Education, 2019). Despite research identifying staffing challenges (Downes & Fuqua, 2018; Hudson & Hudson, 2019) and showing how innovative partnership initiatives among various stakeholder groups, including universities, can assist (Young et al., 2018), recruitment challenges persist (Downes & Roberts, 2018). These studies invite researchers to explore such challenges from the very foundations that set RRR education apart from its metropolitan counterparts.

Halsey (2019) reported that 47% of all schools in Australia are described as non-metropolitan; yet recruitment policies and practices attempt to replicate a one-size-fits-all approach. This approach has been viewed as problematic when understanding and responding to issues of RRR place, difference and diversity (Roberts & Downes, 2019). Attracting, supporting and retaining quality teachers for RRR schools can be consistently viewed in recurring and overarching themes within the literature, with the influence of school leaders being identified as a key factor (Roberts & Downes, 2019). Responding to RRR staffing opportunities and challenges has been described as a complex process that requires thinking and acting beyond scientific and quantifiable methods (Halsey, 2019). Explorations, however, cannot ignore these perpetual and persistent issues if there is to be an Australian education system that promotes and delivers excellence and equity (Department of Education, 2019).

Over time, research has seen the opportunities and challenges of staffing RRR schools move the recruitment paradigm from general acceptance of expected teacher shortages, transience and inexperience, towards more innovative explorations of stakeholder partnerships, particularly those that partner with universities as a means of forming connections with pre-service teachers, to build their conceptual understandings of RRR education (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). What is evident within the literature is that pre-service teachers who prepare for and experience a RRR teaching placement play an integral part of the flow of high quality teachers to RRR schools (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Young et al., 2018). Universities and education departments can effectively facilitate graduate teachers' readiness for classroom teaching in RRR schools (Hudson et al., 2020, 2021). Yet, what is relatively unknown is the specific role that school leaders play when they are supporting pre-service teachers in the school and community.

RRR school communities are characterised by a strong sense of place (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Being deliberately conscious of place entails knowing the context and culture of the school and community, with a focus on relationships with, and in, the school and community (Roberts & Downes, 2019). Gruenewald (2003) suggested that a conscious sense of place has several dimensions that intertwine to shape teachers' identities, experiences and possibilities and the challenges they may face. This sense of place has implications for the significant nature of fit, when it comes to quality staffing and the processes for ascertaining it (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). For school leaders, getting to know pre-service teachers while they are getting to know the school and its community is vitally important (Morrison & Ledger, 2020). Such a relationship allows both parties to share experiences, ask questions, get a sense of their place (inside and outside the school context), and debunk misconceptions about what it is like to live and teach in a RRR community (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Young et al., 2018).

However, the building of such relationships has not always been possible for school leaders who may rely on human resource departments to fulfil vacant teaching positions. Reliance solely on centralised and standardised human resources recruitment processes can, in effect, serve to create a placeless approach to staffing RRR schools (Downes & Roberts, 2018). Indeed, "*placeless*

education” was described by Herbert (2020, p. 73) as the decontextualised development and design of Australian education policies that are blind to the geographical, historical, political, cultural and social contextual factors that are inherent in the fabric of RRR schools.

Roberts and Downes (2019) cautioned against using the phrase “*rural schools are different,*” voicing concerns that researchers, policy makers and education system leaders have the potential to position all RRR schools as the same in being “*distinctly ‘non-metropolitan’*” (p. 52). In other words, a one-size-fits-all approach to policy development and recruitment design is blind to the staffing challenges that each RRR community faces (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Herbert, 2020). Additionally, the non-metropolitan positioning of RRR education lacks an active conscious placing of RRR school leaders’ voices in recruitment processes as a means to ensure quality teachers for their schools.

A school leader’s “*voice and visibility of contexts, relationships and positioning*” (Halsey, 2019, p. 8) make a significant difference to a RRR school community. Effective school leaders are attuned to the needs of their school and community and can deploy leadership approaches that adapt to changing situations (Hersey et al., 1996). In terms of supporting teachers (pre-service and in-service), effective school leaders are deliberate in making others aware of things outside their immediate school environment (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2021). Providing a quality education for all students remains the central responsibility of school leaders, and yet their roles have seen increased functions and responsibilities around broader advocacy for their school place. This includes when they are supporting pre-service teacher placements, experiences, and recruitment processes (Halsey, 2019). Leaders’ intentions are attributed to their actions (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002), whereby internal goals are expressed and made visible (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2021). With this in mind, RRR principals and deputy principals are required to possess rich skillsets, leader behaviours and leadership approaches that incorporate intentional advocacy and actions for their school place and community.

Australian RRR schools have been described as inherently complex organisations (Da’as et al., 2018), particularly given their demographics, geography and cultural diversity (Halsey, 2018). In fact, the role of school leaders in RRR schools is complex and significant (Halsey, 2018). They are required to lead cognitively complex contexts, while balancing a range of diverse activities, people and resources (including pre-service teachers). Given that the literature has emphasised that management and leadership of teaching staff are only two of the myriad of complex tasks that RRR school principals and deputy principals undertake (Hardwick-Franco, 2019), it is reasonable to suggest that “*contexts, factors, relationships and resources that impact on learning and opportunities don’t exist as discrete entities*” (Halsey, 2018, p. 4).

Leading a RRR school is distinctively reliant on strong school-community links and school cultural development (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Roberts & Downes, 2019). RRR school leaders face institutional challenges (Gruenewald, 2003), as they function within centralised policy that has traditionally favoured the voice of the non-rural (Herbert, 2020). Therefore, it is critical to highlight and preference the views of school leaders, in particular their place consciousness, when they are addressing the staffing requirements of their schools (Hardwick-Franco, 2019). Considerable attention has been given to the pragmatic issues that surround staffing RRR schools (Downes & Roberts, 2018). However, RRR school leaders’ skill development needs to be commensurate with the specialised skills necessary for their expanding job responsibilities (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

The complexity of the organisational structures of RRR schools, combined with the imperative to partner with universities and pre-service teachers, has diversified the role of school leaders. This complexity could attribute to why “*the approaches proven to work [are] not universally adopted by education jurisdictions*” (Downes & Fuqua, 2018, p. 45). It could be suggested that the complexity of the school organisation, including the role that leadership plays in the organisation,

may mean that recruitment process can never be universally adopted due to the inherent needs of each RRR school place.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks underpinning the research project focus on leadership approaches that identify the complexity of school organisations, while also aligning to Australian RRR school contexts. Hersey et al.'s (1996) situational leadership theory framed the interview research questions, which explored how the RRR leaders adapted their leadership approach to suit the context and people with whom they worked in the Far North Queensland region, particularly pre-service teachers who were visiting on placement. This theory provided a lens to consider leadership styles. To facilitate further investigation, contingency leadership theory (Fiedler, 1993) provided scope to understand whether RRR leaders' effectiveness was contingent on their leadership approach (task-orientated or relationships-oriented) as they supported pre-service teachers during placement experiences.

In addition to these two theoretical frameworks, the essential leadership criteria identified by Fluckiger et al. (2014), in particular partnerships-powered and peer-supported approaches to leadership, underpinned the research questions relating to the leadership approaches adopted by school principals and deputy principals to create partnerships within the Far North Queensland region, and with universities and pre-service teachers. Of particular interest was how the Far North Queensland leaders partnered to develop a repertoire of strategies and tools to problem-solve staffing issues related to their region or school context, and whether leadership peer-support transferred place knowledge into improved recruitment practices. Using these theoretical frameworks, the school leadership interview questions and pre-service teacher surveys were created and the data were analysed.

Research Context, Design and Method

This paper reports specifically on the partnership imperatives of a cluster of Far North Queensland high school leaders where leadership intentionality and understanding of place consciousness supported the development of pre-service teachers, while concurrently addressing the employment needs of the region. The research project in its entirety encompassed the perspectives of these Far North Queensland high school leaders (principals and deputy principals, n=9), as well as university placement leaders (n=2), a leader from a metropolitan school who was facilitating a RRR placement preparation program (n=1), and pre-service teachers who had completed a placement in the Far North Queensland region (n=7).

While we do not report specifically about the metropolitan-based RRR placement preparation program in this paper, we wish to acknowledge that it supported the context of the research and therefore the design and methods adopted. The RRR placement preparation program was based at a large metropolitan high school in Brisbane, Queensland, and the program centred on (a) attracting, developing and preparing pre-service teachers for placements in RRR Queensland schools, (b) developing high quality work-ready pre-service teachers, and (c) supporting the recruitment of high quality teachers to RRR locations. The preparation program was led by the leaders of the large metropolitan high school; however, it was developed and implemented within a tripartite partnership that included universities, RRR school leaders, and pre-service teachers.

A key feature of the research design involved aligning the theoretical framework and research questions with the context of the leadership partnerships that were already operating. Therefore, to build on the knowledge of those on-the-ground and participating in the research, constructivist inquiry informed the methodology (Mertens, 2019). The research questions were developed to reflect the theoretical frameworks, while being able to build in the school leaders'

knowledge of their context and circumstances (Fluckiger et al., 2014). The three research questions that focused on the school leadership approaches were:

- To what extent does a partnerships-powered and peer-supported approach to attracting, supporting and recruiting teachers to Far North Queensland support pre-service teachers' desires to work there?
- What are the contextual considerations for attracting and retaining pre-service teachers to the region?
- How can school principals' and deputy principals' leadership skills be developed to encourage future teachers to be employed in the region?

The research design and methodology were based on the premise that school leaders needed to continue to operate in their already complex roles with acute awareness of, and sensitives to, their school context. Likewise, the placement preparation program, the university partnerships, and the pre-service teachers' education (e.g., placements) were simultaneously operational. Therefore, mindful of these functions, data were collected in two phases (Semester 1 and Semester 2), using techniques suitable for the circumstances of the participants (e.g., face-to-face interviews for RRR school leaders and online surveys for pre-service teachers).

The first phase of data collection (Semester 1) focused on pre-service teachers who had completed a placement in Far North Queensland. The pre-service teachers were invited to respond to 10 questions using a five-point Likert scale (i.e., 'To what extent do you agree with the statement' – strongly agree to strongly disagree) and eight open-ended questions. The survey questions reflected the intent of the research design, particularly in terms of leadership support (e.g., 'I was supported and encouraged to immerse myself in the school cultural context'). Other questions included items about accommodation (e.g., 'There are living arrangement options available to suit pre-service teachers on placement and early career teachers'), financial grants (e.g., 'This placement was only possibly through the provision of a grant or bursary'), and prospective employment opportunities (e.g., 'I will pursue employment in Far North Queensland after graduation'). Demographic data about the pre-service teachers were not collected.

The second phase of data collection (Semester 2) mirrored the phase one pre-service teachers' surveys, and also included the university placement leaders and RRR school leaders. This paper focuses mostly on the data collection via interviews with the Far North Queensland school leaders. Their interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face in Far North Queensland. Considerations emanating from situational and contingency leadership theories (Fiedler, 1993; Hersey et al., 1996) informed the creation of semi-structured interview questions, with the aim of reflecting the characteristics of principals' and deputy principals' work which had impact in RRR contexts (e.g., 'For your school context, what support does a pre-service teacher require for their placement?').

The questions also aimed to interrogate a partnerships-powered and peer-supported approach (Fluckiger et al., 2014) to attracting teachers (e.g., 'Do you offer a pathway for employment across the Far North Queensland region or your school?'). Understandings about the partnerships fostered by school leaders, pre-service teachers, universities and the metropolitan placement preparation program leaders, and the degree to which the partners supported each other and the pre-service teachers, were essential to designing the interview questions.

The leadership theoretical frameworks (Fiedler, 1993; Hersey et al., 1996) and leadership criteria (Fluckiger et al., 2014) were used to identify and analyse the key themes of the school leadership interview qualitative data. The platform NVivo supported this process. The emergent themes were then descriptively analysed against the pre-service teachers' quantitative data to build a broad picture of participants' experiences. All data sets were analysed to inform findings and, taken as a whole, provide a portrayal of the existing recruitment approaches of a cluster of Far North Queensland school leaders.

Findings and Discussion

Three main themes emerged from the school leaders' interview data: (1) leadership place consciousness; (2) leadership intentional actions; and (3) leaders partnering with a shared philosophy. Within these three overarching themes, sub-themes provided additional insights into how each impacted and influenced pre-service teachers' experiences prior, during and after a RRR placement. The leaders possessed a rich understanding of the cultural and contextual uniqueness of their schools, and sharing this knowledge and supporting pre-service teachers wherever possible were seen as imperative parts of their role. The school leaders expressed their preparedness for deliberate action at both system and school levels. As one leader stated, "*We need to light the fire and fan the flames*" (Principal I) so that pre-service teachers see their place in RRR schools and communities and explore employment opportunities. The findings suggested a recruitment paradigm shift, where school leaders' actions were driving innovative partnerships and multidimensional strategies to attract and retain high quality teachers to Far North Queensland.

Place Consciousness: Sparking an Interest

The contextual and cultural factors of RRR schools make for varied employment opportunities and challenges; however, RRR schools should not be considered purely from a non-metropolitan viewpoint that positions them as "different" (Roberts & Downes, 2019, p. 52). Recruitment processes that are built on strong relationships and partnerships, while understanding the significance of place, are vital (Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Herbert, 2020). Centralised approaches that assume any-fit to recruitment can undermine attempts to use a place conscious approach that targets a best-fit. Establishing an understanding of place consciousness can prove challenging with many pre-service teachers studying at metropolitan-based universities geographically removed from a RRR context, and the leaders reinforced the importance of first creating partnerships with metropolitan schools and universities. These task-orientated and relationship-orientated leadership approaches (Fiedler, 1993) worked as a critical initial link when attracting pre-service teachers.

The vision and strategic action of the preparation program positively contributed to preparing pre-service teachers for RRR placements. The study's findings noted that initial interest in RRR often started when a pre-service teacher enquired about, or enrolled in, the RRR placement preparation program. Additionally, the leaders acknowledged that this interest was also supported by the rigorous screening process the pre-service teachers undertook before enrolling in the program. From there, it became evident that the program nurtured these initial sparks until the pre-service teachers were placed at RRR schools for their professional experience. In the program, pre-service teachers were developing their awareness of more individualised, RRR contextual understandings. A place consciousness was being established prior to commencing a placement, proving advantageous to enrichment when in the RRR community.

Our data revealed that, while the metropolitan-based RRR preparation programs helped spark an interest and develop pre-service teachers' expectations, it was through engaging in "*different type of experiences*" (Principal C) while on placement, that they could get a true sense of place and their part in the community. Relationship-orientated leadership approaches (Fiedler, 1993) adopted by the school leaders then served to be a contributing factor to placements being a positive experience. These included the leaders treating pre-service teachers as "*valued members of the education teaching program*" (Deputy Principal A) and using diverse strategies to inspire and encourage them to develop as teachers. The metropolitan partners were essential in the initial inspiration, and the school leaders noted that they had to "*sell our area a bit*" (Principal B).

Central to these leadership approaches were the relationships. The school leaders ensured that there were programs to "*buddy them [pre-service teachers] up*" (Deputy Principal D). One

principal outlined that there were “*some distinct advantages*” (Principal B) when they placed pre-service teachers in accommodation with their peers. This relationship-based approach to creating partnerships would see the pre-service teachers and early career teachers discuss the “*transition between university to career, and what's that going to look like for them*” (Deputy Principal D). Particularly, these leaders outlined that through these relationships, the pre-service teachers would come to know “*the big things that graduates need to be aware of—pitfalls and benefits*” (Deputy Principal A).

The school leaders enacted task-orientated leadership approaches to create partnerships with metropolitan schools, universities and pre-service teachers, so the pre-service teachers could leverage what their schools had to offer. The school leaders adopted more relationship-orientated leadership approaches once the pre-service teachers were at the schools on placement.

Both of these leadership approaches valued the development of pre-service teachers’ place consciousness. These findings support the argument that school, university and pre-service teacher preparation programs that spark an interest in RRR school experiences for pre-service teachers are transformative (Young et al., 2018), while also illustrating the significant part that RRR school leaders were playing in these processes.

Place Consciousness: Cultural Contextual Dimensions

The school leaders’ extraordinarily strong sense of place highlighted that they possessed a sensitivity to the cultural and contextual circumstances and needs of their schools (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). They knew their schools deeply. Place consciousness underpinned their everyday work and life. A strong theme that emerged from the data concerned how their place consciousness could be shared with pre-service teachers so that they could establish their place in the community (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). The leaders noted that an essential part of their role was to share knowledge of their RRR place wherever possible, particularly to support pre-service teachers. The leadership approaches valued the connecting of pre-service teachers with other people within the school and community, as a way to enrich their experiences (Hersey et al., 1996). Sometimes this involved connecting with the local council. For example, one deputy principal explained that:

Our council has done a fabulous job in marketing tourism and they have made this handy little brochure about things to do around the Tablelands and a calendar of events. So, I’m able to just go there [and let the pre-service teacher know] this is what’s on in our community when you happen to be here. (Deputy Principal F)

Place consciousness encompasses several contextual dimensions (Gruenewald, 2003) that extend far beyond being teachers within school grounds. The leaders shared how they would promote and support engagement opportunities for pre-service teachers while they were on placement. There was a sense that these experiences helped pre-service teachers shape their teacher identities within RRR contexts, while also considering the possibilities and challenges they might face. The school leaders identified the need “*to really show them all of the other attractions of an area and what it is to live in a community, because when pre-service teachers come to us, or beginning teachers come to us, it can be very isolating*” (Deputy Principal F).

The role of sharing information about the community was undertaken in various ways by different people, but it was often initiated by the principal or deputy principal. The school leaders requested that teachers connect with pre-service teachers to share what it is like living in a RRR community. For example, one deputy principal explained that “*I always go to the faculty beforehand, and say you need to show them [pre-service teachers] what it’s like living in a community*” (Deputy Principal F).

Providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to establish their place consciousness was prioritised as a way for them to connect to the place, the community and the students they had to teach. As one school leader stated, when teachers engaged in community-based opportunities (e.g., sport, cultural activities), connections to the school students increased: “Every one of our teachers knows our students beyond their name. They know something about them and connect with them” (Deputy Principal E). The pre-service teachers’ survey responses supported these findings, with all participants agreeing to being encouraged to experience the lifestyle of the community beyond the school environment, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Pre-Service Teachers’ Levels of Agreement (%) to the Likert Scale item About Connecting with the Community

Survey Item	Phase	SA	A	N	D	SD
I was encouraged to experience the lifestyle of this community beyond the school environment	1	66	34	0	0	0
	2	75	25	0	0	0

Legend: SA strongly agree, A agree, N neither agree or disagree, D disagree, SD strongly disagree

Data collated from all leaders demonstrated that “if you [pre-service teachers] want an authentic experience for what life's going to be like when you finish” (Deputy Principal D), then experiencing the lifestyle beyond the school community was necessary. The school leaders all reported that school leadership, key staff and the wider school community all played significant roles in helping pre-service teachers immerse themselves in life outside of school. Through their experiences, the pre-service teachers established their own sense of place in the RRR community, and this therefore helped to determine if and how they would fit (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). As the pre-service teachers were ultimately “coming to know” the place where they might become a teacher (Reid et al., 2010, p. 263), their personal understandings and connections to the school and community provided a “platform that pre-service teachers can then launch from” (Principal G).

While the school leaders reported the importance of providing pre-service teachers with information about the community, they also suggested that they noticed differences among some of the pre-service teachers according to their demographics. Some leaders reported differences in engaging with the community based on “relationship status” (i.e., singles, couples) and based on gender (i.e., single males, single females). Although the pre-service teachers in both Phase A and Phase B agreed that they were encouraged to experience the lifestyle of the community (Table 1), demographic data were not collected about them. This was a limitation of the research project. Future research could endeavour to understand and investigate further the differences reported by the school leaders.

Place Consciousness: Fanning the Flames for Good Fit

The school leaders used relationship-orientated leadership approaches (Fiedler, 1993) to encourage and support the pre-service teachers’ experiences. There was a common view among the school leaders that the quality of experiences and relationships contributed to whether the RRR community was a good fit or not. The school leaders stated that pre-service teachers who were committed to trying “something different” (Deputy Principal A) or to having an “adventure” (Deputy Principal A) were more likely to establish their sense of place.

The school leaders provided examples of pre-service teachers who decided to stay within the region: “Once people get here, they go, oh, this is pretty good” (Deputy Principal D), due to the opportunities, connections and relationships created. This then contributed to a successful transition to employment. It was explained that graduate teachers who

have just seamlessly come in ... have settled, have strong social networks and have really embraced community, they are the ones who've done prac here. The ones that are

struggling are the ones who haven't done prac here and have come in completely green.
(Deputy Principal E)

The leaders' peer-supported leadership approaches (Fluckiger et al., 2014) meant that they worked together to support pre-service teachers and promote a good fit for all involved. Keeping high quality teachers within the region was just as important, if not more important, than keeping them solely for their own school staff. The school leaders identified that working with peers to establish a "good fit" (Principal C) supported long-term retention of teachers within the Far North Queensland region. One principal noted that "schools are more and more doing their own recruiting" and therefore intentionally "building up a network [of leaders]" (Principal B) to support pre-service teachers and early career teachers.

The school leaders were aware that some of the pre-service teachers were "career change people, and they've got families" and "not every undergrad teacher now is straight from school" (Principal I). This had implications for their leadership approaches. Cognizant of the different needs of pre-service and early career teachers in terms of place and fit, the school leaders peer-supported each other across the cluster. This often meant that, "long term, they [teachers] normally transfer to somewhere else within the region" (Deputy Principal A). The peer-supported leadership strategies were seen to be central to the success of any proposed or enacted recruitment in the region.

The findings indicated that once a pre-service teacher was interested in teaching in a RRR location, professional connections and placement experiences had the potential to turn sparks into brighter flames. School leaders seem to play a significant role in this work, particularly as data from the pre-service teachers illustrated that they were either neutral or agreeing with the notion of pursuing employment in the Far North Queensland region (see Table 2).

Table 2: Pre-Service Teachers' Levels of Agreement (%) to the Likert Scale Item About RRR Appointments

Survey Item	Phase	SA	A	N	D	SD
I will pursue employment in Far North Queensland after graduation	1	34	0	66	0	0
	2	50	50	0	0	0

Legend: SA strongly agree, A agree, N neither agree or disagree, D disagree, SD strongly disagree

To address recruitment needs, the school leaders prioritised the need to create strong partnerships with peers and other leaders, while also supporting pre-service teachers. Both leadership approaches were seen to be fundamental when helping pre-service teachers establish their own place consciousness while ascertaining if the RRR school community would be a good fit.

Leaders' Intentional Actions: Interactions Influencing Positive RRR Placements

The school leaders' responses varied in the type and number of interactions they had with pre-service teachers, either through the RRR placement preparation program or upon allocation to their school. School leader interactions were dependent on their role, and those that were effective were intentional in their actions. For example, either the principal or deputy principal initiated contact with pre-service teachers because of their coordinating roles with universities and the human resource personnel in the region. One deputy principal stated that they invested time and energy into "a very detailed process ... [they] sit down and do a phone call with each of our pre-service teachers ... What is it that you're [expecting], and let's have a look at your last prac report" (Deputy Principal A). Based on the pre-service teachers' responses, the effect of providing specific contextual information about the RRR school supported the shaping of a positive placement experience. As one pre-service teacher said,

I was able to contact the Head of Department six weeks before I arrived. I received my timetable about three weeks beforehand along with a welcome letter. On arrival I was given a desk in the Maths staffroom. The principal welcomed me to the school in the staff meeting. (Pre-service Teacher 4)

Once the pre-service teachers were “in the school” (Deputy Principal A), the school leaders coordinated other staff members (e.g., pedagogical coach, early career mentor) to support them. While the pre-service teachers identified heads of department and supervising teachers as the leaders who provided the most support, the school leaders’ actions (sometimes in the background) were intentionally building these connections. The pre-service teachers described leadership support in terms of their interest and degrees of encouragement, including providing them with their time and offering key information about the school or the profession. These discussions helped the pre-service teachers get “to know who’s who in the zoo, organisational structures, behaviour philosophy and pedagogy” (Principal G). The school leaders suggested that pre-service teachers’ willingness to observe, absorb information and ask questions about cultural and contextual differences and what they might encounter when or if they were to work at the school helped guide the support needed. However, the pre-service teacher surveys indicated mixed results when asked about leadership support (see Table 3).

Table 1: Pre-Service Teachers’ Levels of Agreement (%) on the Likert Scale Item About Leadership Support

Survey Item	Phase	SA	A	N	D	SD
I felt supported by the leadership team (i.e., principal, deputy principal or site coordinator) to undertake this placement	1	34	66	0	0	0
	2	50	25	25	0	0

Legend: SA strongly agree, A agree, N neither agree or disagree, D disagree, SD strongly disagree

The school leaders explained that their actions to engage and support pre-service teachers were intentional; however, scope for improvement was identified. In contrast, the pre-service teachers expressed that “it might have been nice to have the deputy or the site coordinator reach out to me a little bit more just to check in and make sure that everything was going ok” (Pre-service Teacher 1). The support required by the pre-service teachers was contingent on many varying factors and therefore, based on this finding, it is recommended that clear expectations for support should be discussed in the initial interactions with pre-service teachers and reviewed throughout the placement experience.

Leaders’ Intentional Actions: Teacher Career Aspirations

School leaders play a significant part when supporting the career aspirations of pre-service teachers (Hudson et al., 2020). One deputy principal noted that nurturing pre-service teachers’ career aspirations was part of their role: “Quality professional development is offered within and beyond the school” (Deputy Principal F). Additionally, the school leaders ensured that the pre-service teachers were aware of the early career teacher and leadership programs available and which could be “accessed and funded by schools” (Deputy Principal A). As a means to fan the flames, the school leaders reported that they

try to treat them [pre-service teachers] like all our 40 staff and provide them with the same opportunities they have. So, for example, we have a leadership program here now, which is for aspirants ... pre-service teachers are provided with those opportunities. (Principal B)

Career aspirations vary from being classroom ready, through to leadership opportunities within schools and across the region. Retaining quality graduates in RRR school communities is influenced by a myriad of factors (Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Young et al., 2018); however, the significance of the RRR placement for long-term career opportunities cannot be understated. More specifically, “knowledgeable others” (Sharratt, 2019, p. 16), such as a supportive leader or

supervising teacher, can help shape pre-service teachers' experiences in unimagined ways. Data from the study indicated the importance of placing pre-service teachers with experienced teachers as well as with early career teachers. The early career teachers provided practical transitional support, for instance, *"this is what I did for my portfolio ... this is how I found my first six months"* (Deputy Principal D), whereas experienced teachers outlined more aspirational career opportunities offered across the region.

Leaders' Intentional Actions: Leading Recruitment with Intentionality

Da'as and colleagues (2018) claimed that school leaders engage in high levels of cognitive complexity to manage recruitment needs, wants and processes. In our study, the school leaders adapted, adjusted and adopted a range of structures and processes to accommodate the staffing needs of their schools. They shared a variety of perspectives when talking about pre-service teachers' placements, their different situations, the problems faced, and the decisions made. This echoes the research of Da'as et al. (2018) and Woznyj et al. (2020). The school leaders shared stories about the complex nature of recruiting for their Far North Queensland contexts. There was also a shared view that they felt supported by the metropolitan placement preparation program, as indicated in the comments from two principals:

There's a selection process, but we know there is a support process that occurs for the 12 months and we've seen that in action. (Principal B)

They [pre-service teachers] have that opportunity to understand what each of these schools offer. (Principal C)

For RRR preparation programs, initiatives and innovations to work effectively and successfully, especially in terms of their aims, objectives and outputs, school leaders require intentionality in their leadership roles, approaches and skillsets. The premise for this intentionality was identified as genuine partnerships and relationships, which require dedicated and focused time, along with adequate and adaptable resourcing. The school leaders identified that they required time and resources to strategically plan and collaborate with other leaders. Bursaries and grants for pre-service teacher placements were still a priority (Downes & Roberts, 2018); however, they recommended centralised funding to support programs (e.g., the RRR preparation program), personnel (e.g., leaders at the school level) and resources (e.g., accommodation options across the region). As one principal explained: *"It's not my job to fund recruitment for our system. And this is the irony. Our [centralised] system doesn't get that"*. (Principal I)

Intentional leadership approaches and partnerships occurred. However, the funding of these endeavours was absorbed at the school level. Funding in this way provided scope for the leaders to be flexible (e.g., schools could support accommodation options for their area). However, the sustainability of funding such approaches was an identified area of concern.

Leaders' Shared Philosophy: Light the Fire, then Fan the Flames

The school leaders all understood that a shared philosophy of nurturing and supporting the career development of pre-service through to early career teachers (and beyond) was fundamental. When referring to pre-service teachers' interest in teaching in a RRR location, one leader coined the phrase, *"We need to light the fire and then fan the flames"* (Principal I). A shared recruitment philosophy would not happen serendipitously, and the leaders noted that intentional leadership approaches and actions were essential. Leading with a shared philosophy was identified as a way to support the complexity of their collective staffing responsibilities. The school leaders pointed out the importance of creating and maintaining strong partnerships. The significance of these partnerships was seen as imperative because *"there's not large numbers of people that are interested in coming into the teaching profession anymore ... we need to really start targeting the universities about these opportunities we have in place"* (Deputy Principal F).

Teacher shortages are currently being felt throughout Australia, and pre-service teachers' pathways are viewed as one solution (O'Flaherty, 2021). Many RRR schools have a small pool of applicants (DeFeo & Tran, 2019), and while Roberts and Downes (2019) suggested that school leaders may not want to manage recruitment, their role in supporting those that do is fundamental. The school leaders reported that a significant amount of time was necessary to support pre-service teachers prior, during and after a placement. Specifically, one deputy principal reported that *"out of the 40 weeks of work time a year that I do as a deputy, I probably spend close to five to seven of those just on pre-service stuff"* (Deputy Principal A).

In their accounts, the school leaders shared examples of the types of activities that they underwent to prepare for the arrival of pre-service teachers (and newly appointed staff). These included communicating via emails and/or phone to discuss logistics in the weeks prior, sharing information about the context of the school and the community, meeting pre-service teachers on arrival, coordinating suitable mentors, organising accommodation, introducing them to mentors, working through any paperwork with each individual pre-service teacher, touring the school and providing an overview of the contextual and cultural heritage of the school, and touring the town to build up a sense of community and culture. The complexity of the RRR leaders' role can be underestimated and these examples further support research (e.g., Pendola & Fuller, 2018) that RRR school leaders are often balancing multiple roles, while faced with considerably less support than their metropolitan counterparts.

Transience was identified as an innate part of RRR schools' recruitment plans, and while there was general acceptance and support for teachers who take career aspirations to other schools or regions, a strong sense of place meant that beginning teachers were more likely to stay. The school leaders identified that nurturing a sense of place consciousness was part of their recruitment plan; however, this required time and effort. Their endeavours were supported by strategically partnering with other leaders of the region (peer-supported approaches) and with universities and metropolitan schools. One principal explained that the partnerships across the leaders and their schools was *"a strength of this region, in terms of a lot of collaboration and communication, which I think is really good. I actually think as a region, the high schools work very well together"* (Principal G).

These indications suggested that a shared philosophy supported an awareness of the details of each school's contextual needs, and this cannot be mirrored by a centralised human resources system. Therefore, it appears that the impact of school leaders across a region, incorporating the role of place consciousness and intentional action, cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion

The peer-supported and partnership-powered leadership approaches adopted by the cluster of Far North Queensland high school principals and deputy principals provided strategies to support the development of pre-service teachers, while concurrently addressing the employment needs of their region. The school leaders provided insights into how place consciousness, intentional actions and the region's shared philosophy impacted and influenced pre-service teachers' experiences prior, during and after a RRR placement. In this way, the school leaders offered pre-service teachers a way to shape their understandings of the distinct culture and context of particular schools and the region. This has implications for the significant nature of fit in obtaining quality staff. The findings of this study suggest a paradigm shift away from traditional human resources recruitment endeavours towards school leaders driving innovative partnerships and multidimensional strategies to attract and retain high quality teachers to Far North Queensland.

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