The Importance of Local Context in a Global World: Three Case Studies from Rural and Remote International Locations

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Abstract

Global education is often framed in terms of standardised testing that makes comparisons across nations. This is particularly evident with international measures like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15-year-olds in member countries. Images on the PISA website provide representations of education that seem to clash with some of the contexts where we have conducted research. This prompted an investigation into educators' talk about local contextual realities, and how—or whether—they were impacted by global calls for quality education. The study focused on three different educational programs: education for adolescent girls in a refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, school education in a western Queensland rural/remote town in Australia, and the Migrant Education Program in rural Illinois in the United States. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations. Following data analysis, three case study narratives were constructed. A final step of analysis identified four shared pillars that made learning in rural and remote areas impactful and effective: context relevance, educators' openness to learning, flexibility of teaching/learning approaches, and responsiveness to learners' needs. The data demonstrated that the educators had a broader picture—national or global—in mind, but their main aim was to provide learning opportunities that were responsive, flexible and contextually appropriate to their location.

Keywords: *context, global education, PISA, place, rural and remote education*

Introduction

In recent decades, global education has often been framed in terms of standardised testing. This includes scores from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), whereby 15-year-old students are tested for their "*ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges*" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022d, What is PISA section). Images on the PISA website (OECD, 2022d) show youth located in what might be described as conventional or traditional classrooms and laboratories and engaged with books, library resources, technology and test tubes. It was these images that stimulated our interest because such contexts are not the educational experiences of all young people. Specifically, they are not the experiences of many of the young people who have participated in our research.

Although we recognise that the OECD represents only 38 of the 195 nations that currently exist (OECD, 2022c; Worldometer, 2023), images like those on the PISA website imply aspirational thinking: what high-quality formal or institutionalised education should be like regardless of location. PISA compares students' scores across nations, but the PISA promotional images are completely outside the experiences of some school-aged young people. This is the case for those in developing countries, as well as for those in particular locations in developed countries, including OECD member countries like Australia and the United States. If PISA represents a global view, then there would seem to be a disparity between the global aims and opportunities that are supposedly on offer and the local specificities that comprise educational reality for some young people. Our thinking about local contexts was the starting point for the study reported here.

Disparity between contexts is not a new research quandary, as research has shown that school students in rural and remote locations in Australia and the United States often lag behind their urban peers and are less likely to continue to higher education (e.g., Gao et al., 2022; Halsey, 2018; Showalter et al., 2019). In referring to rural and remote locations, we recognise the challenges around defining exactly what these terms mean (Roberts & Guenther, 2021). For this paper, we use Roberts' and Fuqua's (2021) definition of rural as "*a catchall for places situated beyond major metropolitan centres and those that identify with spaces beyond these centres*" (p. 2). Remote is understood as involving large distances from urban areas, with associated geographical and social isolation that impacts "*access to the full range of education, health, and community services*" (Roberts & Guenther, 2021, p. 20).

In this paper, we consider what it is like for educators to operate in a selection of rural and remote contexts, and if or how they try to meet global educational expectations. We present case studies from diverse locations: a remote refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a rural/remote location in Western Queensland in Australia, and a rural community in Illinois in the United States. We plan to address two research questions: What do the educators describe as important in their teaching practices in their local contexts? How are their teaching practices informed by global aims for education?

We begin this paper with a brief discussion of the literature about the notion of global education and the importance of place in education, before presenting the three case study narratives. The paper concludes with a discussion of our findings.

Literature Review

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2021), 1948 saw education recognised as a fundamental human right. By 2000, the United Nations (UN) was focused on achieving "*universal primary education*" for "*children everywhere, boys and girls alike*" by the year 2015 as part of its Millennium Development Goals (UN Department of Public Information, 2013, p. 1). Despite the non-achievement of this goal, access to education improved. In 2011, only 57 million children were out of school, compared to 102 million in 2000 (UN Department of Public Information, 2013).

In 2016, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals extended the focus of each goal, including the educational goal, from developing countries to all countries, with achievement by 2030 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Goal 4 emphasised the quality of education, with the argument that achieving it would enhance peace and prosperity. Education was seen as being able to "*reduce inequalities and reach gender equality and is crucial to fostering tolerance and more peaceful societies*" (p. 1). However, in a recent report on the goals' progress, the UN (2022) highlighted the negative impact of COVID-19 on education and consequent challenges in trying to meet Goal 4: "*severe disruptions … worrisome consequences for children's*

learning and well-being, particularly for girls and those who are disadvantaged," especially in developing countries (p. 34).

In recent years, developed nations have taken up a quality focus through testing regimes that measure their educational capabilities. This is generally justified by the argument that "*measuring outcomes will help to improve efficiency and quality*" (Lingard et al., 2016, p. 1). Lingard et al. highlighted the problem that "*the purposes of education are now narrowly conceived as the production of a certain quantity and quality of human capital*" (p. 2). They discussed the unintended outcomes of the Australian National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (see Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2022), including the "*narrowing of curriculum options*" and "pedagogic *changes that see teachers teaching towards the tests*" (p. 10). Similarly, Kalantzis et al. (2005) discussed the effects of testing regimes: students appearing "*superficially knowledgeable*" but without "*knowledge of sufficient depth for a life of difference and change*" (p. 91). Like Lingard et al. (2016), they also regarded the use of "*one-size*" tests as having disastrous effects on curriculum and learning (p. 93). They advocated for educators and education systems to rethink learning and assessment and to take account of diversity and complexity.

Lingard et al.'s (2016) and Kalantzis et al.'s (2005) considerations resonate with the comments we made at the beginning of this paper about the images on the PISA website (OECD, 2022d). The images implied that quality education is perceived as having a particular appearance regardless of location. This is a problematic proposition. On the one hand, the OECD does not represent all of the world's nations; it represents developed countries or, according to Ball (2008), "*the most wealthy nations*" (p. 33). On the other hand, the particular view of education that is presented raises questions: Could education look the same in the diverse contexts of even well-developed nations? Should it look the same?

Such considerations turn our focus to the view of many researchers that place and context are important in education. Researchers interested in place-consciousness or place-based education have offered multiple reasons for considering place in education (Bartholomaeus, 2018; Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2010). As early as 2003, Gruenewald noted the way that "*contemporary school reform takes little notice of place*" (p. 620). He argued that moves to standardise education and focus on mandated standards did not recognise the role of schools in the production of social context. He and Smith (2010) argued that shifts towards place-based education help to build "*the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain communities*" and induct "*students into the knowledge and patterns of behavior associated with responsible community engagement*" (p. xvi). More recently, Herbert (2020) expressed a similar view that education has become "*largely standardized and placeless*" (p. 75).

Standardised education stands in contrast to place-conscious or place-based education, which aims to "*connect meaningfully to the lives of learners and the communities from which they come*" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621) and ensure that education is "*meaningful and a source of communal connection*" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2010, p. xviii). As Bartholomaeus (2018) argued, place-based education helps students "*recognise that learning is relevant to their lives and is preparing them to be future active citizens*" (p. 356). In line with this thinking, many researchers have advocated for connections between education and place (e.g., Bates et al., 2019; Gola & Rocca, 2021).

The argument for relevant learning has been taken up in significant literature that considers the importance of educators' pedagogical decisions—their theory, philosophy and approach to teaching—to maximise learning. The seminal work of The New London Group (1996), for example, emphasised that human knowledge is "*primarily situated in sociocultural settings and heavily contextualized in specific knowledge domains and practices*" (p. 84) and that learning, therefore, needed to be embedded in social, cultural and material contexts. This was a foundational assumption of their conceptualisation of pedagogy, which they described as a

"*complex integration*" of factors (p. 83) for facilitating learning. One of the factors was situated practice or "*immersion in meaningful practices*" (p. 85). This was seen as a way of making sure that learners are motivated as well as convinced that the learning is relevant to their lives.

In line with The New London Group's (1996) thinking, Kalantzis et al. (2005) identified the necessity to contextualise learning by linking "*the known*"—learners' lifeworld experiences or prior knowledge—with "*the new*"—new knowledge and experiences (p. 76). As Kalantzis et al. explained, effective learning involves "*strange but intelligible material … grounded in students' lifeworld experiences*" (p. 84). They concluded that learning results in "*a journey away from the lifeworld along the breadth axis of expanding knowledge, taking a cross-cultural journey of one sort or another*" (p. 76). It is this notion of grounding learning in familiarity that place-conscious or place-based education highlights.

In the broader rural education literature, notions of place are discussed. Corbett (2021a) explained that "*rural education's preoccupation with place … albeit undertheorized, has been an enormously productive movement*" (p. 1). He went on to say that it:

> confronts "*metrocentric*" *education and social policy that fail to account for differences between places and how rural areas have been largely absent from key educational discussions. One example of this phenomenon is the relentless centralization and bureaucratization of public services whose mandate is principally driven by the establishment of performance norms and the application of standardized indicators to quantify relative performance across space.* (pp. 1–2)

Corbett acknowledged that "*the idea of rural itself is a slippery spatial notion*" (p. 2), arguing for a nuanced understanding of the rural and the "*need to theorize place very carefully going forward, considering both the productive value and challenging problems*" relating to it (p. 2). Similarly, Roberts and Downes (2019) cautioned against a "*metro-normative framing of the metropolitan as normal and the rural as deviant*" (p. 52), because this ignores the complexity and specificity of place. Their discussion of what they called "*the rural difference trope*" (p. 52) highlighted the potential for taken-for-granted assumptions that identify an urban-rural binary and homogenous rural communities. Such thinking is reminiscent of Downey's (2021) argument that "*you have to know a rural place to do good work in a rural place*" (p. 73).

Nevertheless, researchers (e.g., Corbett, 2021b) have problematised place-based education, suggesting that it should not be taken as an unquestionable panacea for improving education. Corbett (2021a) talked of the potential dangers of rural education focusing inwards, arguing that this could result in the loss of ability to see the global. He emphasised that "*connecting the multiple layers of place, from home to globe, is essential to building the kinds of understanding required for an inclusive and sustainable future*" (p. 11). These ideas reflected Jackson's (2010) warning, a decade earlier, that "*resistance to globalizing trends*" and the preservation of traditional identities "*can be dangerous*" to rural communities and schools (p. 90).

Such arguments resonate with the pedagogical frameworks discussed earlier. Although The New London Group (1996) and Kalantzis et al. (2005) highlighted links to learners' lives and place as important aspects of pedagogy for making learning relevant, this aspect was never intended to be used in isolation. The New London Group stated explicitly that "*there are limitations*" to such use "*as the sole basis for pedagogy*" (p. 84). It is from these foundational ideas that we talk about our study of educational practice in three locations.

The Study and its Methodology

This paper draws on data from three research projects in three different international locations: the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Queensland in Australia, and Illinois in the United States, which were remote, rural/remote, and rural respectively. The locations were a convenience selection,

determined by opportunities for research linked to Robyn's interest in rural education and Sazan's interest in education for humanitarian contexts. All three studies were conducted with university ethical clearance and, for the study conducted in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the university also required a risk management plan.

Using semi-structured interviews (Barbour & Schostak, 2005) and observations, we collected data in the three locations as part of wider studies into available educational offerings. Multiple short interviews were conducted with the research participants, generally following observations of lessons or activities. Interview discussion was framed around finding out what the educators' teaching goals or intentions had been, their reflections on their teaching practices, and their insights into students' learning.

Sazan collected the data in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, with the interviews conducted in Kurdish and Arabic, the languages used by the research participants. The interviews were translated into English in conjunction with the transcription process. Sazan's field observations were documented in English. Robyn collected data in the other two locations, which used English exclusively. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms have replaced all names.

The data were analysed using a constant comparison approach (Lingard, 2008) to identify what and how the educators said about their local context and their teaching, and if they referred to the relationship between place and teaching/learning and the global context. This was followed by analysis using Maxwell's (2012) approach for connecting information, whereby we looked "*for relationships that connect statements and events within a context into a coherent whole*" (p. 113). From the analysis, we built three narratives that tell what was happening educationally in the three contexts.

Each narrative is presented as a case study (Thomas, 2021) that is bounded (Merriam, 2001) by our focus on a particular educational offering. This allowed us to "*fence in*" (Merriam, 2001, p. 27) the object of study: education for adolescent girls in a refugee camp (Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Case Study 1), school education in a rural town (Australia, Case Study 2), and a summer program for the children of migratory agricultural workers (United States, Case Study 3). In the narratives, we focus on the data provided by particular educators, selected because they provided detailed information about the local context of their work: a peer educator (Evin) in Case Study 1, a teacher (Taylor) and the principal of her school (Kylie) in Case Study 2, and a teacher (Jessie) in Case Study 3.

The construction of the case studies sits with theoretical understandings that education in a particular location operates within social, discursive and material relations amongst people and a specific context (Fairclough, 2001). That context can be complex and involve multiple layers, including the context of the educational offering, the broader educational system, the local community, and so on. The case studies provide insights into the lived experiences of those involved and are representative of the data we collected (Willis, 2019) about each location. We wanted the narratives to explore everyday aspects of the education being conducted (Ochs & Capps, 2001) through the experiences described by the educators.

As a result, the narratives represent an interweaving of data analysis with data. Consequently, we have not identified a list of specific findings for each case study, although we do provide summary statements at the beginning of the Discussion section. To a certain extent, these processes mean that readers have to "*put their faith in [our] judgement*" (Willis, 2019, p. 471). Although this may be seen as a limitation of the way we have represented the data, we have used verbatim excerpts from the interview transcripts for Case Studies 2 and 3 and the English translations for Case Study 1 as supporting evidence.

After creating the case studies, we realised that there were commonalities. As a result, we conducted an additional layer of analysis by reading across the cases. The Discussion section talks about the findings of this analysis, as well as our interpretation of the data concerning the second research question: How are their teaching practices informed by global aims for education?

The Three Case Studies

Case Study 1: Education for Girls in a Refugee Camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Case Study 1 focuses on Evin who lived in the Kawrgosk Refugee Camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and worked as a peer educator in a peer education program that operated there. Although school education was available for adolescents in the refugee camps in that region, it has been described as poor:

> There is a lack of formal school curriculum in schools … Payments of teachers … still a barrier as they are not well covered by the government … due to the lack of clean drinking water and electricity, few children participated. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018a, p. 1)

We interviewed Evin on the periphery of the refugee camp, among thousands of tents where over 7,700 Syrian refugees resided (UNHCR, 2020). In this camp, school education was one of the later services to be established (UNHCR, 2014, 2018b). Adolescents, though, were able to access resources and programs that operated in a youth space in the camp. One program was peer education which offered a short course to upskill adolescents for survival in the camp context, as well as in their lives beyond the camp. It aimed to enhance their communication skills, help them live safely and healthily, and enable them to deal with the emotional trauma of being refugees. The United Nations Fund for Population Activities (2006) has developed numerous training toolkits for working with adolescents in humanitarian and crisis situations, and its Iraq office has provided intensive peer education training and training-of-trainers since 2008. The peer education program has been a major component of its activities for youth development, particularly with vulnerable populations residing in remote areas.

During our interview, Evin held an old peer education manual in her hand; it showed signs of wear and tear and its edges were ripped. Evin was slightly older than the adolescent girls she held sessions for. She was a Syrian refugee who had lived in the refugee camp for three years and was part of the community. Her old manual was designed to provide guidance about introducing adolescents to target issues, such as sexual and reproductive health, personal hygiene, gender-based violence and anger management, topics that reflected the challenges and issues experienced in the camp. As we have explained elsewhere (Mandalawi & Henderson, 2023), Evin spoke about the prevalence of early marriage:

> They're year eight and they are getting married. And if you ask the family they say it is her wish. You know … they are year nine; they came to me. They have failed maths and English. I tutored them. One of them said if I fail this time I won't go back to school. Okay, why won't you go back to school? Because I want to get married.

The topic of early marriage was incorporated into the peer education program, reflecting its responsiveness to the adolescent girls' needs and making their learning relevant to their daily lives in the camp. These learning opportunities were designed to help the girls make healthy decisions. From Evin's perspective, incorporating real-life issues into the sessions meant that the adolescent girls could understand the consequences of their decisions and develop increased awareness of the issues impacting their lives. She explained:

> They will become mums …. They will pass it on to their kids. They will know how to raise their kids and communicate with them. You see … they say as soon as our kids reach the adolescent and teenage years we can't deal with them anymore. I like a lot the idea that you

> *don't tell the youth what is wrong and right; you raise awareness, and they make sense of what is right and wrong, like what we do in peer education.*

Evin's description highlighted the program's approach. The learning was participatory and "*intended to be transformative,*" using "*a range of learning strategies: simulation activities, scenarios, dialogues, case study stories and role plays*" (Mandalawi & Henderson, 2023, p. 118). The strategies incorporated thinking about hypothetical crises that could arise in camp life, and reflecting on and discussing possible solutions with other adolescent girls (Mandalawi & Henderson, 2023). This allowed the girls to hear and consider "*new ways of looking at the world*" (Paul & Quiggin, 2020, p. 579) and to build repertoires of strategies for coping and making decisions as they went about their daily lives in the refugee camp.

Knowing the specific aspects of the lives of the adolescent girls would have been challenging for an outside educator. For Evin, her familiarity with the context of the camp and the fact that she had lived the experiences of the adolescent girls who were attending her peer education sessions meant that she could tailor the program to target specific issues faced within the context of that refugee community. Such issues included personal safety, violence, sexual health and mental health. The main aim of doing this was to prevent some of the recurring social issues that often had life-threatening consequences. Evin said, "*We didn't always stick to the toolkit,*" emphasising that she and the other peer educators often addressed issues that were needed and wanted by the adolescent girls. For example, the adolescent girls "*wanted to learn about communication and dealing with their family members; they wanted to learn to communicate with their families better … so we did that.*"

The sessions allowed the girls to engage freely in dialogue. Evin said that the program touched on issues that the "*schools are not addressing.*" She emphasised that, while the formal school in the camp taught mathematics, English and other academic subjects, it did not address the life issues that the adolescents were facing. Evin designed and ran the peer education program to add an "*enjoyment element*" to their lives. She explained:

> *Look, in the morning, school is from 8:30 to 12:45. They come home, they eat, they rest a bit, do homework, and it becomes evening. They watch TV, go on the internet [on mobile phones]. There is nothing new. So when they come to the peer education training, it is something new in their life … it is something different.*

Understanding the intricate details of the girls' lives meant that she knew not only the topics that needed to be addressed, but also the methods for engaging the adolescent girls with those topics: "*We change their mood with different activities and games, because their life is not easy.*" Reflecting on the effect this has on the adolescents' ways of thinking and dealing with problems, she said that the families of those who participated in the program also noted these changes. Because she lived in the community, Evin often "*bumped into*" the mothers. She reflected on her encounters with mothers in the camp, saying that they often told her that their adolescents' behaviours, actions and moods were "*not like before … they are so happy.*"

By taking part in the peer education program, the adolescent girls made sense of their world. This was because it was tailored around their lives and Evin was familiar with the context. She was part of that context and had a solid grasp and understanding of the issues that needed to be addressed and how to do that in a culturally appropriate manner. Nevertheless, despite the program being grounded in camp life, it also aimed to build the adolescent girls' capacities to be problem-solvers in their future lives beyond the camp.

Case Study 2: Education for School Children in a Western Queensland Town

Case Study 2 focuses on an Australian school and explores the work of a teacher (Taylor) and the principal (Kylie). The school was located in a small, low socio-economic town situated in a farming and sheep district in Western Queensland, more than a 10-hour drive from the capital city and the

eastern coast. On the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ACARA, 2015), 12% of the student population was in the top quartile and 32% in the bottom quartile; 45% of the students identified as Indigenous (Henderson, 2020).

After graduating from university, Taylor moved to the town to take up her first teaching position. After "*growing up in the big smoke,*" she found the rural location almost intimidating. She explained that it was "*very much like living in a fishbowl,*" because "*everything you do and say is being watched by either the parents, the children you're teaching, or other community members.*" As Taylor explained, "*even when you run to the shop, you end up down there talking for two hours to somebody—a parent or someone associated with the school.*"

Taylor felt that the community regarded teachers "*from the city*" as "*knowing nothing*" and as temporary residents, because "*she's only going to be here for six months and then she'll bugger off again.*" As a result, Taylor decided that she would need to be "*getting in there and getting to know them as people and as friends.*" To this end, she became committed to community functions, particularly those that benefitted children attending the school. One such event was *Under Eights Week* which had been held in Queensland for over 60 years. The community where Taylor was teaching, however, had not had such an event "*in over five years because there was no one there who wanted to take that on.*" She explained: "*I thought, no, these kids deserve an under-eights day.*" She explained that "*going out into the community, I had made connections*":

> So when it came to organising … I had connections established. So when I needed hundreds of boxes to make a train full of teddy bears, I could go down to the local supermarket and … ask the people. Can I please have your boxes after Thursday's delivery? … If I hadn't gone into the community and made myself known, those sorts of things wouldn't be possible.

When asked why those community connections were so important, Taylor responded:

> Because it's a rural community. They're just, well, who are you then? Why should I be giving my boxes to you? What do you do for me? Do you come and shop here? So … coming into the community, it's important.

For Taylor, becoming part of the community was necessary for her professional life. She was determined not to be seen as an outsider from the city but as an active member of the community. She was adamant that "*joining the netball group and … softball*" had enabled her to connect with local families and gave her a much better understanding of how to relate the curriculum to the children from the community. She acknowledged that she was "*learning all the time,*" and found that she had to "*be mindful … of when you're in the role as a teacher and when you're in the role as a friend, and making sure that they never clash.*" Taylor admitted that there was a lot of trial and error in learning to be the best teacher she could be: "*I think we've all made mistakes,*" and "*because we teach and work in rural areas … our professional development may be less than those of our sisters and brothers near the coast.*"

Taylor's principal, Kylie, was very aware of the pressures experienced by novice teachers and she had given her school's programs and the teachers' professional learning considerable thought. Kylie was concerned about the school's results on the Australian National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (ACARA, 2022), but she tried to focus on student improvement rather than better NAPLAN results. This was evident in her language, where she talked about wanting to do the best for "*our kids.*" She explained that the school staff had "*worked hard to find tests that worked for our kids … so we kind of tailor-made our testing.*" Similarly, they had worked to find a way of enhancing their teaching and improving student results. As a result, they were "*seeing gains*" in student achievement.

Kylie highly regarded her teachers working "*on the same team.*" She established regular teaching-team meetings which enabled "*shared goals*" for learning to be developed. She also encouraged the teachers to "*consciously make decisions about their professional learning and about why*"

they're wanting to do it and what they want to find out." As Kylie pointed out, professional learning in rural contexts was challenging, because it was almost eight hours drive to the nearest regional centre and even further to the capital city. The team meetings, however, provided a form of professional learning on the school site. She said that the teachers "*would probably say they've learnt a lot more from each other*" through the teaching-team meetings. She concluded that "*it's not that they have to go away to learn everything.*" Team meetings were an opportunity to ask "*How are you going to do it?*" and to share: "T*his is how I thought I would do it.*"

Kylie explained that these strategies had turned the teachers' focus from their classrooms to a shared school approach: "*What do we want all of these kids to learn?*" This involved sharing knowledge about the local context and about what was important to the students' lives, whether in the community, in the wider world, or in the future. Kylie explained that the teachers brought "*amazing skills*" to problem-solve and plan their teaching. She said that "*rurality is actually a strength. The context provides a strength-based approach because you've had to do it differently. You've had to think differently about how you support, enable, build.*"

It became clear that Kylie's goals for the school and its students were focused on making sure that education was relevant to the students' lives. She wanted their education to apply to their lives in the local community, but she also wanted to ensure that they were prepared for life in other locations as well as for life in the future. She acknowledged that there were tensions between what she regarded as important for her school and what the education system was promoting as excellence. Nevertheless, she was adamant that it was necessary to consider the context because there was no point in "*doing the same thing [as all other schools] and not getting anywhere.*" If what they were doing "*wasn't working,*" then they had to rethink their approach to teaching and learning. This had directed the school's way of working and, in Kylie's opinion, it was making a difference.

Case Study 3: Education for Migratory Agricultural Workers' Children in Illinois

Case Study 3 was conducted in a rural area in Illinois in the United States. School teachers can choose to work their summer break in the Migrant Education Program which assists the children of migratory agricultural workers to achieve an education (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, United States Department of Education [OESE], 2021; Northern Illinois University [NIU], 2022). The teachers working in this program provide academic, psychological and emotional support (Gouwens, 2021).

To be eligible for the federally funded Migrant Education Program, the children's parents "*must have moved within three years across a school district line and engaged in qualifying work,*" which includes planting, harvesting and processing crops, and catching and processing seafood (NIU, 2022, Eligible Children section). Some of the children in the program had moved across district and state borders, while others had travelled from Central America.

Jessie was a regular classroom teacher, but she also taught in the summer school program, which aims "*to ensure that all migratory children reach challenging academic standards and graduate with a high school diploma,*" along with being prepared "*for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment*" (OESE, 2021, Program Goal section). In brief, summer schools provide opportunities for education in what might be termed catch-up mode, whereby "*high quality and comprehensive educational programs,*" conducted by registered teachers, aim "*to reduce the educational disruption and other problems that result from repeated moves*" (NIU, 2022, Program Purpose section).

For Jessie, working in the summer program was giving opportunities "*that I really wish we could offer all our kids.*" She said it was a "*whole program kind of thing where … we have the visiting art teachers and we have the swimming and the physical education,*" thus teaching "*the whole child.*" In contrast, she talked about the demands of regular teaching, where "*paperwork can be*

overwhelming," along with *"other demands of following this legislation and that legislation."* Jessie went on to explain that in the summer program, *"while it's still a rigorous program, there's a little more freedom to be a professional, to be able to do what I went into teaching for, and that's to teach, not to write about teaching and not to fill out these forms and do this stuff on the computer."*

In working with migrant children, Jessie was quite aware that the families' lifestyles had disrupted their school education. She also noted that language differences often made it difficult for the parents to feel comfortable in school contexts. She liked to follow up with families who *"miss or something"*:

> *I'm hounding them and calling. You need to do this; you can do this; this is a non-negotiable. … You need to do this every single year, not just when they're little. So I really try to work with the parents in that regard to get them accustomed to the school way. Because it's different in their countries of origin. They're not expected to necessarily work with the kids.*

When Jessie began to teach in the summer program, her ability to speak Spanish was based on what she had learned in high school:

> *I had an excellent Spanish teacher. I had four years of high school Spanish with a native speaker. So that foundation that she gave me was enough that, when it came time and I was exposed to daily Spanish, that I could pick it up from there.*

However, for Jessie, this was not enough. She wanted to improve her communication with families and she set out to learn more Spanish. She began by hosting teachers from Mexico on an exchange program: *"I filled out the paperwork and I hosted my first teacher. I was not that successful."* In *"the reciprocal exchange … I got to go there and it was incredible, and I couldn't speak Spanish very well."* She explained that *"I spent most of the time just smiling and nodding and smiling and nodding."* Jessie's experience resonated with what she had seen parents do:

> *It gives you a perspective on how the parents feel. That was a really eye-opening experience for me because a lot of times they're talking to me and I'm smiling and nodding because I think I understand it, and then they stop. I'm like, that was a question. Oh no, I have no idea what that question was … I mean it's humbling and you go, "Okay, I didn't understand that."*

From this turning point, Jessie *"hosted three different teachers. The last one that I hosted … five or six times. She just came back again last year. Not to work, but just for a visit because we're like lifelong friends now."* Jessie's experiences meant that she was able to improve her Spanish, as well as learn about the education that her students had previously experienced: *"I learned a lot about the Mexican educational system and … their national curriculum."* Jessie said her experiences had *"such a lasting impact on me … That's when my Spanish started to improve. My knowledge of the Mexican educational system helped out a lot."*

From this self-directed learning, Jessie was able to work in bilingual contexts. She explained that it takes time to get children accustomed to understanding that Spanish is *"an equal language with English; that this is a bilingual class; we speak both languages."* It was important to make *"that family connection."* Being able to understand the children's home language enabled communication with parents, but it also allowed the children's learning to build on *"the familiar."* She recognised that there was diversity amongst her students: *"I know which kids are … bilingual, which ones are not … so basically I've got all of these different [experiences]."*

Jessie's stories highlighted that an understanding of children's home backgrounds is vital to teachers being able to engage students in learning. For the migrant children she was teaching, getting parents involved in their education required knowledge of the parents' work on farms. *"Knowing the population"* was vital. She gave one example where parents were invited to meet

with teachers at night. Initially, these events were not well attended: "*Why aren't they well attended? What's going on here?*" Discussions with parents revealed their perspective:

> They were like, "We can't do it. We can't get there and have this meeting and still have enough time to get our kids ready for the next day. It would be better if they were on Friday." This [view] was almost universal. All right. Well, I hate that idea, but I need them to come. So we started having our … meetings on Friday … it was standing room only.

Jessie despaired that some teachers had the idea that "*these parents really don't care.*" She disagreed: "*They care about their child. They may not know how to do the things that we, as educators, think they should be doing, but that parent cares about that child.*" Finding ways of making connections to families and students' prior knowledge was core to Jessie's work. She knew the local context, but her students were relatively new to that context. Helping families understand the context and its ways of doing education was one of her aims. For example, Jessie helped her students make sense of the context they were in. One example related to a student who "*had gotten a grant to go to the piano camp*" conducted by an Illinois university. The grant provided funds for fees and boarding. Jessie explained that "*the teachers … took up a collection,*" after which she and another teacher:

> took him [the student] shopping and we bought him things like … a shower caddy because he was going to be staying in the dorms and … pyjamas. A lot of times they don't have pyjamas. It's not something that's important or meaningful to them.

Jessie wanted the student to "*fit in at the piano camp,*" as he was a "*gifted piano student.*" Belonging was seen as a prerequisite to learning.

Jessie concluded that her "*gift*" in life was "*doing what I can do with the kids.*" This included letting students know "*that they are accepted, and can have a safe place to learn.*" While many of Jessie's actions were outside of the curriculum, she argued strongly that these were essential to students' educational success.

Discussion

The three case studies provide detailed descriptions in response to the first research question: What do the educators describe as important in their teaching practice in their local contexts? In Case Study 1, Evin explained her role in the refugee camp as helping adolescent girls build survival skills for their current environment, but also for the future. Through a participatory approach, the peer education program aimed to build strategies and the ability to problem-solve.

In Case Study 2, Taylor highlighted how she had worked to build relationships within the small-town community in Queensland, in order to know her students' life circumstances and understand the community from an insider perspective. She aimed to make school learning relevant by linking the curriculum to her students' experiences. Kylie, the school principal, supported on-site professional learning through discussions and sharing. Her overall aim was to get individual student learning on track, rather than focusing on system and state expectations.

Case Study 3 focused on Jessie's strategies for increasing communication with parents. She accomplished this by building her knowledge, a process that involved crossing borders (United States–Mexico) and learning how vulnerable learners can be. In particular, Jessie aimed to help her learners and their parents understand their new context and how education worked there.

The three case studies are different, particularly in terms of context and the educators' ways of working within those contexts; yet it was clear that there were commonalities. Our analysis across the case studies indicated that they shared four pillars that seemed to make learning in those rural and remote areas impactful and effective: context relevance, educators' openness to

learning, flexibility of the teaching/learning, and responsiveness to learners' needs. We begin our discussion by unpacking these pillars.

Context Relevance

The case studies demonstrated the importance of context in how education was planned and enacted by the educators. Although all three of the case study contexts were rural and/or remote, each had different factors that defined the experiences of the learners. In all cases, the educators took the experiences, backgrounds and daily lives of the learners into consideration as starting points for learning. Evin (Kurdistan Region of Iraq) understood where her learners were coming from—their lifeworlds—because she had a similar background and had lived through similar experiences, while Taylor (Queensland) and Jessie (Illinois) deliberately set out to learn about the lives of their learners. All linked the learners' lived experiences ("*the known*") with "*the new*" (Kalantzis et al., 2005, p. 76), enabling the learners to use their prior knowledge, experiences, and what Jessie called "*the familiar*" as the foundations for new learning.

In doing this, the learners' place was taken into consideration, so that the learning was relevant to the location. Place-consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003) was vitally important; yet place was not always static. For both Evin and Jessie, their learners had come from one place—sometimes involving traumatic circumstances—but they were living and learning in another place. Shaping education around transitions relating to place (Mandalawi & Henderson, 2023) played a significant role in the education being offered. For Jessie, it was important to ensure learners understood how to be, do and know in the current location, while remembering that their past places and histories were also important.

Freire (1993) used the concept of paradigm to show how educators should purposefully aim to liberate learners from vulnerability: to empower individuals so they are able to cope with the challenges of their context or place. This was particularly evident in Case Studies 1 and 3, where the learning was developed with a focus on contextual factors, to help learners cope with the realities and impact of these. Evin, for example, incorporated local issues of refugee camp life, such as early marriage and safety, into the peer education sessions. In contrast, Jessie highlighted the importance of being able to adopt the practices of a new place as a way of becoming insiders in a new community (Gouwens & Henderson, 2021).

None of the educators talked explicitly about pedagogy, although that in itself is not unusual (Comber & Nixon, 2009). Nevertheless, it was clear from their descriptions that they had particular ways of teaching, and that they were informed and reflective about what they did and how learning was working. This was particularly noticeable in their focus on learners and the importance of operating within a particular local context.

Another term that did not appear in any of the interview transcripts was *global*. Yet it was clear that the three educators operated in multiple layers of context, including the global. Evin highlighted the context of the refugee camp, but she was also adamant that peer education had to provide strategies that the adolescent girls could use in the future and beyond the camp. Survival in the current context was an aim of the program, but there was hope that the adolescent girls would only be there temporarily. Taylor and Kylie were mindful that school learning had to have relevance to learners' lives, but that it also had to meet system requirements and be useful for lives beyond schooling and in other contexts. At the same time, though, Kylie was somewhat dismissive of what the education system regarded as excellence. It appeared that there was systemic pressure to be concerned about NAPLAN results, but Kylie was determined that successful student learning within the school was essential, before she would worry about whether the system would regard her school as being excellent on national standards. Despite Kylie's resistance, we suspected that she was feeling systemic pressure to improve her school's NAPLAN results.

For Jessie's learners, the local context was sometimes challenging because they had come from somewhere else. In moving herself into another context that was familiar to many of the families, Jessie experienced the vulnerability that often comes with such moves. She was also mindful of the need for access to and achievement of qualifications that would be accepted beyond the current lives of the learners' families. This was a consideration relating to education on a national level. There was no indication that she was concerned about global standards, even though she was dealing with education across two countries.

The Educators' Openness to Learning

The three educators were all involved in personal learning and demonstrated openness and willingness to continue to learn. Evin, Taylor and Jessie had invested themselves in not just educating others, but also in educating themselves. They were involved with their local communities, the families, and the local culture. Evin was part of her local community. She was a refugee, lived in the camp, and her reality was the reality of her learners. Taylor and Jessie were open to learning about the local factors that were relevant to and influenced their learners. They saw an urgency to demonstrate that they were part of the local community or were being integrated into it, to understand and put into perspective the different layers of the learners' lives, both within and outside their homes.

Flexibility of the Teaching/Learning

When the educators were from the local community (Evin) or striving to become part of the community (Taylor and Jessie), they were perceived as community insiders rather than as individuals with superior knowledge or power over learners. As the case studies showed, one-way learning, or the banking model of education as Freire (1993) called it, was not evident. Instead, each of the case studies demonstrated the effectiveness of two-way learning.

All of the educators talked about using a set curriculum or, in Evin's case, a toolkit, but they were not constrained in terms of how they covered that curriculum. They were willing to adjust and adapt their teaching to draw their learners into learning. Taylor and Jessie explained the importance of understanding the local context to help students achieve success with the established curriculum. For Evin, there was much more flexibility in the learning focus, as she could move outside the toolkit to address other issues that had arisen in the refugee camp.

To encourage learning, the educators linked directly to the local context and, whenever necessary, set out to learn more about the context themselves. This aspect, though, was only part of their approach to teaching, but it demonstrated their willingness to be as flexible and adaptable as possible.

Responsiveness to Learners' Needs

The case studies demonstrate that the educators were responsive to their learners' needs. Evin's approach, for example, was survival-orientated. She tailored learning based on the realities of the refugee camp, modifying the learning foci according to current camp issues and events. All three educators strived to educate better and make the learning more relevant to learners' lives, by first understanding the lives of their learners and then altering the learning to suit the contextual factors they observed. Even in Taylor and Kylie's school, where there was a set curriculum as well as expectations for improvement in scores on national assessments such as NAPLAN (ACARA, 2022), the educators were focused on making a difference for the learners themselves. Enhancing national test scores was regarded as a secondary consideration.

This point takes us back to our concerns about the disparity between global aims for education, as per the PISA images, and the nature of local educational offerings. Our case studies demonstrated a focus on the local, as the educators wanted to ensure that relevant and purposeful learning was occurring. At the same time, they thought about learning beyond the

specifics of the local, keeping an eye on the types of contexts that their learners might need to negotiate in the future. For all the educators, the purpose of learning was for their learners to be able to cope, live and make decisions in their current context while being prepared for life in other and future contexts. PISA's global standards were not part of the educators' concerns, although it was evident that quality and equity—the foci of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.)—informed their thinking about education.

For Evin in Case Study 1, key program considerations were focused on survival in a situation grounded in crisis, turmoil and trauma, but she was aware that some of her learners might move beyond the context of the refugee camp. Knowing how to survive and being able to problem-solve in any context were embedded into her plan for the adolescent girls. Although access to traditional schooling was limited and it was regarded as poor quality by those in the camp (Mahmoud, 2021), the adolescent girls were accessing an alternative education, albeit a short-term intervention that could be attended on multiple occasions. The peer education program aimed at building the types of skills that are regarded as empowering, global and transformative (Freire, 1993; OECD, n.d.). According to the OECD (n.d.), learners *"need to be empowered and feel that they can aspire to help shape a world where well-being and sustainability"* are achievable, by *"creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility"* (p. 1). These transformative competencies identified by the OECD seem to resonate with the underlying goals of the program the adolescents attended, because they were learning to critically and creatively solve problems and take responsibility for themselves.

In Case Study 2, Taylor and Kylie focused on the local, but they also had a future focus. They wanted their learners to be prepared for their current context as well as the wider world they might encounter in the future. Their approach was specifically student-focused, as they aimed for all learners to be successful at learning. As would probably be expected, their main priority was the established curriculum. However, as Kylie explained, she wanted the teachers in her school to make professional decisions about how to enhance student achievement. Shaping teaching for that particular context was seen as an essential but not a static endeavour.

In Case Study 3, Jessie's focus was on linking different contexts together and working towards the learners and their parents being able to operate successfully within those different contexts. She saw this as a necessary aspect of being successful at school. She embraced global considerations, concerned mainly with the learners being successful within the US educational context without degrading or denying their experiences of life and education in Mexico. She aimed to facilitate learning success in a new place and she was willing to shift her teaching to do so.

Conclusion

All three case studies demonstrated that the educators wanted a quality education for learners in their care. What constituted quality, however, was different in each case. In other words, the educators decided what quality was for their particular learners at that particular time in that particular local context. Although they did not use the term *pedagogy*, it was evident that pedagogical decision-making underpinned the work they were doing, as they were aiming for the best possible outcomes for their learners.

In particular, the educators in all three case studies were focused on education for their local context, but they all wanted the education they were offering to stand their learners in good stead, both in the future and globally. Their thinking was aspirational—wanting a high level of success for learners, in education as well as beyond—but it was not limited to the type of education implied by the images on the PISA website (OECD, 2022d); neither was it informed by what the OECD (2022b) called *"PISA shock"* or *"PISA-based education policy"* (Araujo et al., 2017,

p. 20). Rather, their thinking and their teaching were shaped contextually, and they manoeuvred their teaching to meet the current and potential future needs of their learners.

The data collected and reported by the OECD and the images on the OECD website were of no consequence to these educators. They were focused on the teaching and learning for which they had responsibility, while keeping an eye on how that learning could be transferred to future contexts. Outside measures of learning, especially the quality measures advocated by PISA, were not their concern. This was particularly the case in the refugee camp, where survival skills and strategies, along with enhanced awareness of issues such as safety and health, comprised the learning focus. Even in the other two sites, both located in PISA member countries, there was nothing to suggest that PISA warranted any attention whatsoever. As Araujo et al. (2017) indicated, PISA comparisons are based on "*a conception of excellence in education that is blind to contextual differences*" (p. 21). In all three case study locations, context played an important role.

We recognise that the case study approach means that we are not able to generalise our findings. However, we are now more curious than ever about the OECD's attempts to measure students' ability to "meet real-life challenges" (OECD, 2022d, What is PISA section), especially concerning recent attempts to design assessments for students who may be out-of-school in developing countries (OECD, 2020). In this work, out-of-school youth have been linked with poverty, rural areas, gender, and ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities (p. 15). The OECD has noted that it will be necessary to move beyond "*business-as-usual approaches*" to ensure equitable, quality education (p. 22).

Interestingly, the images that initially sparked our attention have now been used on the cover of an OECD publication: *Are Students Ready to Take on Environmental Challenges?* (OECD, 2022a). With the images showing traditional classrooms and laboratories, with books, library resources, technology and test tubes and nothing that suggests environmental challenges, we cannot help but think that the on-the-ground, flexible and responsive approaches in the three case studies were achieving the types of educational outcomes promoted by the OECD (2022d); yet contextual appropriateness, rather than standardisation, defined the educators' actions.

Of course, we might muse about the alternative images that would represent education in the locations we investigated. For a start, we would want to show the community context as well as the educational context. We would also want to demonstrate the building of relationships with people outside the built school environment of Case Studies 2 and 3 and the youth space of Case Study 1. Overall, we would want to include a range of images to show the breadth and interconnectedness of the educational approaches, rather than a narrow view that just shows formal learning in a well-resourced school environment.

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