Foregrounding Leadership Connectedness: A Preservice Teacher Preparation Program to Staff Australian Regional, Rural and Remote Schools

Catherine Thiele
University of the Sunshine Coast
cthiele@usc.edu.au

Joanne Casey
University of the Sunshine Coast
jcasey1@usc.edu.au

Linda Eager
Department of Education, Queensland
leage2@eq.edu.au

Susan Simon
University of the Sunshine Coast
ssimon@usc.edu.au

Shelley Dole
University of the Sunshine Coast
shelley.dole19@gmail.com

Abstract

Set within the broader employment crisis facing Australian schools, attracting preservice teachers to teach in a regional, rural, and remote (RRR) school community has been a long-standing educational priority. Research has identified the role of placement initiatives, the benefits of preparing preservice teachers for RRR contexts, and the centrality and significance of community and relationships. What is less frequently acknowledged is the role of school leaders in acting as the nexus between preservice teachers and the RRR community. Specifically, how leaders effectively support and enact relationship-based initiatives for preservice teachers. This research explores the leadership strategies of a group of high school leaders—leaders from a large metropolitan Prep-Year 12 College (Brisbane, Queensland) and Far North Queensland. Central to the leadership partnerships is a preservice teacher RRR preparation program facilitated by a Brisbane College via their Teacher Enhancement Centre. In this paper, we report on the strengths of their program in establishing key connections. Implications are drawn in relation to how school leaders connect with other leaders and preservice teachers through the program, and how these connections can support place-based experiences for preservice teachers while concurrently addressing the staffing needs of RRR schools.

Keywords: *professional experience preparation programs, rural teaching placements, leadership strategies, university partnerships, staffing*

Introduction

Attracting high quality teachers to Australian regional, rural, and remote (RRR) schools is a national educational priority (Department of Education, 2022). Consequentially, the role of school leaders (principals and deputy principals) in developing innovative staffing solutions for their community is changing and widely acknowledged (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Halsey, 2018; Hardwick-Franco, 2019). The RRR Australian school workforce urgency is amplified by the current nationwide teacher shortage trends (Castro, 2023; Department of Education, 2022), increasing school leaders' staffing challenges and intensifying the complexity of how to recruit teachers to RRR areas (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). As school leaders commit to close the "*achievement and opportunities gaps for students and families who live in these locations*" (Halsey, 2023, p. 38), envisaging multi-dimensional staffing approaches has become more critical.

This article foregrounds the strengths and innovative actions of a group of RRR high school leaders as they negotiate the current workforce landscape alongside the too common "*deficit discourse*" associated with RRR schooling (Guenther et al., 2023, p.4). In doing so, we do not negate the challenges and barriers associated with staffing RRR schools, or deny the inherent complexity of doing so, but rather, this research highlights the leadership actions of a group of school leaders in shifting the discourse around working and living in RRR communities. The paper presents how a group of school leaders are enacting innovative workforce solutions centred around a professional experience preparation program where forming key connections is fundamental.

Decades of Australian research in RRR education has identified one key theme intersecting the literature: "*community and relationships at the centre of rural education*" (Guenther et al., 2023, p.15). Not surprisingly, the value of community and relationships features strongly in educational leadership research too, as school leaders respond to the changing needs of schools, students, and the communities they serve (Daniëls et al., 2019). Leading a RRR school has become more complex and demanding (Timperley & Twyford, 2022) as school leaders are required to be strategic thinkers, effective communicators, and instructional leaders who can create a positive learning environment for students, support the professional growth of teachers, and balance the expectations of the RRR community. Given the central role that a school plays in a RRR community (Ledger, 2020; Morrison & Ledger, 2020; Nelson, 2022), school leaders who create strong personal and professional networks within and beyond their community have been known to traverse challenges proactively (Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Hardwick-Franco, 2019).

The leadership strategies of school leaders who intentionally partner with universities and other school leaders (Thiele et al., 2023) consistently seek out opportunities and possibilities to restructure or influence policies, programs, and resources to facilitate the process of teaching and learning (Nelson, 2022). How these school leaders balance a range of interacting activities, people, and resources with limited, or inadequate support to do so is less understood (Da'as et al., 2018). Additionally, Gutierrez and colleagues (2019) note that while narrative based knowledge illustrates the benefits of partnerships (e.g., school/university partnerships) and connections (e.g., between school leaders), what is less visible in the research is how professional partnerships are developed, maintained, and sustained.

This research article has two aims. Firstly, it contends that school leaders' connectedness, founded on intentional partnerships and relationships, is fundamental to a multi-dimensional strategy to attract quality preservice teachers to RRR school communities. Secondly, it explores how key relational connections with other school leaders, such as the Teacher Enhancement Centre (TECe) leaders who facilitate a RRR professional experience preparation program (hereafter, TECe Program), strengthen the connectedness and relationships with several key stakeholders (e.g., universities, preservice teachers, school leaders). The findings presented are not prescriptive, nor do they claim to offer solutions to staffing Australian RRR schools. However, they foreground how the intentional leadership actions of a group of school leaders, formed around the TECe Program support a flow of preservice teachers to RRR communities.

Regional, Rural and Remote Australia

The phrase 'regional, rural, and remote' (RRR) is commonly used in Australian policy as "*an umbrella term to characterise non-metropolitan areas across Australia*" (*see* Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p.10). In this section, RRR is outlined in terms of Australian school classifications and the location/s of this research project (based in Queensland). To do this, the geolocation of Australian RRR schools is provided geographically (visually supported by maps) and statistically (descriptively supported by statistics/data). The purpose is to offer a snapshot of the scale and scope of Australia's landmass, the dispersed population, and to position the location of the research participants (i.e., Far North Queensland and Brisbane) (Halsey, 2023, p.37).

It is important to emphasise that the classification descriptions below are based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), therefore they do not address the nuances associated with each of the words 'regional', 'rural', and/or 'remote'. The classifications and descriptions do not provide representations of each 'place', an understanding of Indigenous culture, or the "*sociological, historical construct[s] of rurality*" (Roberts, Downes, & Reid, 2022a, p.127). Classifying schools based on geographical distance and access to infrastructure fails to adequately represent the identity of these communities or reflect the diversity of the people that live there. This limitation is acknowledged; however, the significance of place and rurality appears throughout the other parts of the paper. What is offered in this section is geographical and statistical information alone—the size of Australia's landmass, population, and the location of Far North Queensland/Brisbane provides foundations (rather than context) for the research.

Australia is the sixth largest country in the world (Halsey, 2023) with a landmass of "*7.692 million km²*" (Halsey, 2019, p.8). From the most recent data, the population of Australia is 26.6 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023) with only "*18 population centres in Australian with 100,000 or more people*" (Halsey, 2019, p.8). The means that population density varies across the country. Australia is divided into eight states/territories with each governing their education/schooling. Queensland is the second largest in landmass (behind Western Australia) and the third most populated state/territory of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023) which has implications for school access and infrastructure.

The Education Department classifies schools based on data including, (a) the physical distance to the nearest urban centre, (b) the impact of the physical distance on accessibility to goods and services, and (c) population density (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Kline et al., 2013). Schools that are classified 'regional' are considered to have a range of access, 'rural' school communities have access but with moderate to high restrictions, and 'remote' (and very remote) school communities have access but with high (or very high) restrictions (Kline et al.,2013).

The Queensland Department of Education categorises school locations based on remoteness (regional, rural, or remote) and based on eight regions of the state (Central Queensland, Darling Downs South-West, Far North Queensland, Metropolitan North, Metropolitan South, North Coast, North Queensland and South-East) (Department of Education, 2024a). The Far North Queensland region is located at the northern tip of Queensland (see yellow region in Figure 1) with the capital city (i.e., Brisbane) over 1500 kilometres away.

Queensland currently has a total of 1,797 schools (State, Independent, and Catholic Schools) The Far North Queensland region has 7.7% of the total Queensland state schools, with 27 high schools or P-12 colleges (Department of Education, 2023b). 20 of these high schools or P-12 colleges are classified as 'regional', one is 'remote', and six are 'very remote' (Department of Education, 2023a). The Far North Queensland region has the largest proportion of enrolled First Nations students (18.8%) compared to Queensland's average of 11.4% (Department of Education, 2023c).

Figure 1: *Map of Queensland and Far North Queensland Region (Department of Education, 2024a)*
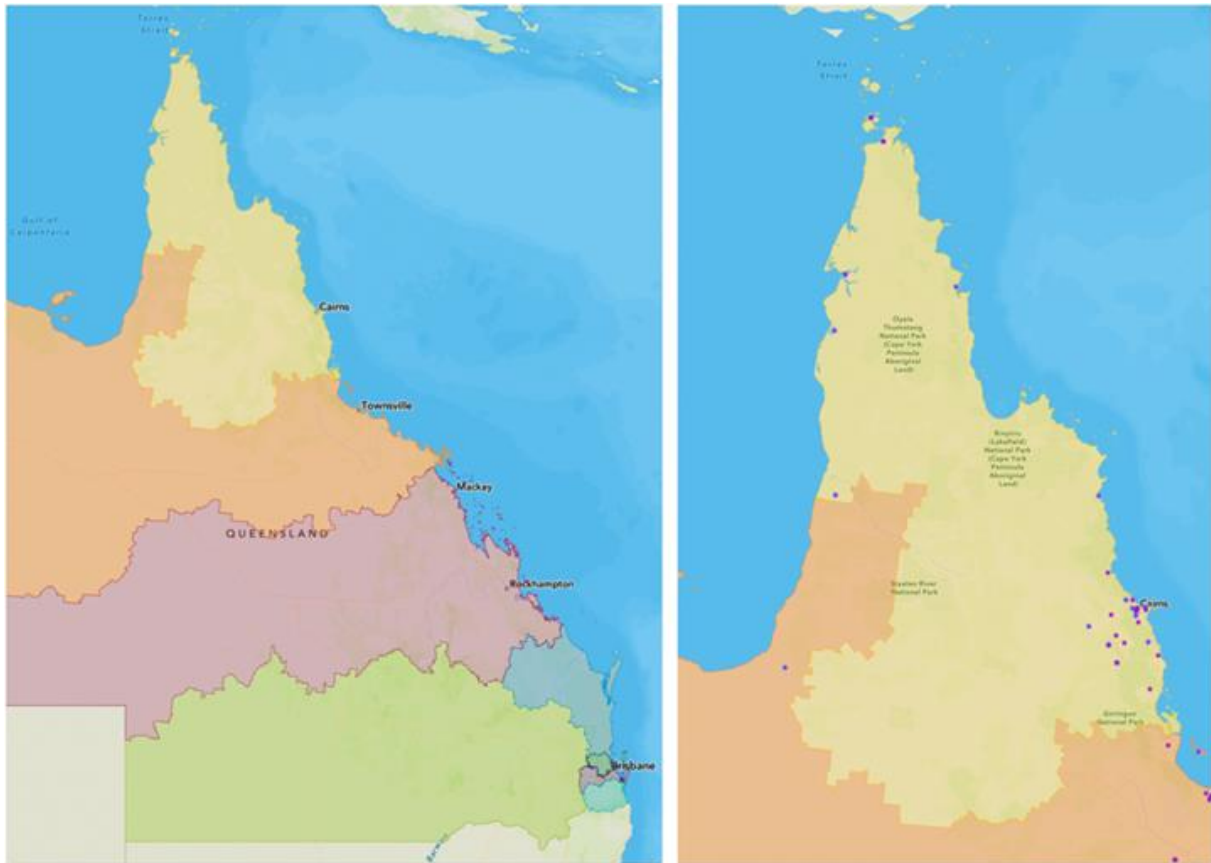
Preservice Teacher Place-based Experiences and Preparation Programs

The urgency to increase the supply of high-quality teachers to RRR schools is critical (DeFeo & Tran, 2019; Halsey, 2023; Hudson et al., 2020). In Australia, the recently published governmental plan to address workforce shortages, *The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan,* identifies five priority areas with *"strengthening initial teacher education"* as the second priority (Department of Education, 2022). Additionally, the Australian Minister for Education and Youth launched a Review of Initial Teacher Education to evaluate how Initial Teacher Education programs prepare *"graduates to be confident, effective and classroom ready"* (Paul, 2022, p.*i*). In the report, *Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review,* the *"significant demand"* for high-quality teachers in RRR schools is clearly identified (Paul, 2022, p.19). The governmental report, *Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel* (Scott, 2023) highlights the need for funding models to support preservice teacher RRR placements. In these governmental reports, Initial Teacher Education programs (Department of Education, 2022; Paul, 2022) are being called to explicitly support and prepare preservice teachers for *"RRR contexts, challenges, and opportunities"* (Halsey, 2018, p.45). This highlights the crucial role that preservice teachers play in addressing the national teacher workforce crisis.

How to effectively prepare preservice teachers for *"teaching readiness"* (Hudson et al., 2020, p.51) in a RRR school community is complex (Halsey, 2018; Hudson et al, 2021). The associated challenges, barriers, and perennial issues are well researched (e.g., *"resourcing and funding" see* Guenther et al., 2023, p.15). Research has equally identified that *"specific interventions"* can improve preservice teacher preparedness and *"support and attract preservice teachers to rural and remote communities"* (*see* Guenther et al., 2023, p.5). Examples include RRR teaching professional experience opportunities (Downes et al., 2018; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Young et al., 2018), university initiatives such as the *Coast to Country* (Hudson et al., 2020; Paul, 2022) or

Over the Hill (Buetel et al., 2011), and RRR immersion field trips (Sharplin, 2010). What is common about the design of these "*specific interventions*" (Guenther et al., 2023, p.5) is that they all provide physical place-based experiences (White et al., 2011) so preservice teachers can get a sense of what it would be like to live and work in a RRR community.

> *Programs… clearly show that living and learning to be a teacher in situ in a RRR school is highly beneficial to individual students, contributes to the professional capacity of their hosting schools, and can make important contributions to local communities through skills and talents not available locally, such as in music, drama, or sport (Halsey, 2023, p.38).*

It has been argued that RRR experiences are too short (Halsey, 2018) for preservice teachers to form a sense of place or place consciousness (Hardwick-Franco, 2019). Nevertheless, RRR experiences (Hudson & Hudson, 2008) value add to an Initial Teacher Education Program because they offer preservice teachers' authentic place-based experiences.

Roberts and colleagues (2022b) contend that at a policy level, the lack of "*rurality*" (p.106) in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; 2014), which influence Australian Initial Teacher Education programs through accreditation, reinforces metro-centric normalities of Australian schooling. This, as a result, inadequately prepares preservice teachers for RRR contexts. Additionally, centralised staffing practices founded on a one-size-fits-all approach (Halsey, 2019; 2023) fail to adequately acknowledge the distinctive nature of staffing RRR schools. Consequently, RRR school leaders are having to address the staffing needs of their school context with targeted and intentional actions (Thiele et al., 2023).

Workforce planning leadership strategies include developing strong school/community/university partnerships (Downes et al., 2018) and incentivising preservice teacher RRR placements (Young et al., 2018). As one example, the Growing Our Own program and partnership between Catholic Education, Northern Territory Indigenous communities, and Charles Darwin university lecturers "*embraces the epistemologies and pedagogies of local Indigenous communities*" (van Gelderen, 2017, p.18) to addresses the Indigenous priorities pertinent to each RRR place. The impact of this place-based Indigenous program illustrates the immense strength of "*working parties inclusive of key stakeholders*" (Wilson, 2014, p.197). The value of stakeholder partnerships involving RRR communities, placement incentives, experiences, and programs must become more visible (Gutierrez et al., 2019).

Leadership Complexity and the Role of Connectedness

> *…if we have such a well-developed understanding of the issues, challenges, and successful approaches, why then are rural schools still hard to staff and why are the approaches proven to work not universally adopted by education jurisdictions? (Downes & Fuqua, 2018, p.45).*

RRR Australian schools are inherently complex organizations due to demographics, geography, and cultural diversity (Da'as et al., 2018; Halsey, 2018). Leadership in RRR communities is distinct, with leaders undertaking a myriad of complex tasks (Hardwick-Franco, 2019). While several factors have been identified to impact educational and learning opportunities in RRR schools (Halsey, 2018), school leadership and staffing agendas are interconnected with these factors and "*don't exist as discrete entities*" (Halsey, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, we turn to the concepts of complexity theory to help articulate the layers of these roles (Hawkins & James, 2018, Ho et al., 2021). We acknowledge that complexity is a contentious and contradictory term (Rosenhead et al., 2019) and in danger of overuse or hyperbole. We use the terms complex/complexity in terms of the social and cognitive complexity of creating and maintaining professional connections while leading a school (Casey, 2022), specifically RRR schools.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research is based on two leadership theories: Situational Leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996) and Contingency Leadership theory (Fiedler, 1993). Situational Leadership theory focuses on the need for school leaders to adapt their leadership approach to suit the context and people with whom they are working (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). Contingency Leadership theory contends that a leader's effectiveness is contingent on whether their leadership style suits a particular situation, and whether the leader is task-orientated or relationships-oriented (Fiedler, 1993). Additionally, the Essential Leadership Criteria identified by Fluckiger, Lovett and Dempster (2014)—particularly the partnerships-powered and peer-supported approaches to leadership—frame how the research explores the connections and relationships of the school leaders involved in this study.

Furthermore, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014) continues to be a framework for all school leaders in Australia. Of the three Leadership Requirements, this research draws on "Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills" as this specifically "*recognises the importance of emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience and personal wellbeing in the leadership and management of the school and its community*" (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014, p.22). According to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's description of this Leadership Requirement, "*Principals are able to define challenges clearly and seek positive solutions, often in collaboration with others*", and "*take account of the social, political, and local circumstances within which they work*" as "they continuously improve their networking and influencing skills" (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014, p.22). Due to the recognition of connecting to community, collaboration, and responding to/in/for the context of a school community, these requirements directly aligned to the aims of this project.

Situational and Contingency Leadership theories frame the theoretical components of the research, whereas the Essential Leadership Criteria and Australian Professional Standard for Principals Leadership Requirements informed the practical components (i.e., survey questions and semi-structured interview questions). Through the data analysis, they collectively aim to reflect the characteristics of RRR school leaders' work. Additionally, we draw conceptually on complexity theory to provide a language to explain this work.

The *TECe Program*: Professional Experience Preparation Program

As background for this research project, we outline the contribution of a RRR Professional Experience preparation program, the TECe Program. The Program is based at, and initiated by, a large metropolitan P-12 State College in the capital city of Queensland, Brisbane. The program is facilitated by a branch of the College called the Teacher Enhancement Centre. Those connected to the professional experience preparation program (school leaders, teachers, universities, preservice teachers) refer to the program as the TECe Program.

The TECe Program aims to attract, develop, and prepare preservice teachers for a professional experience in a Queensland RRR school community. Additionally, the TECe Program aims to produce high-quality, work-ready preservice teachers while concurrently supporting the recruitment needs of RRR schools (i.e., a flow of high-quality teachers). The Program is led by a high school leader (Deputy Principal) and supported by other teachers (i.e., Lead Teacher/s) and administrative officers (i.e., school officer/s). It is developed and implemented at the metropolitan college (Brisbane, Queensland), however to achieve the aim and objectives, the TECe Program leaders work in partnerships with RRR school leaders, preservice teachers, and universities (i.e., Initial Teacher Education providers) across Queensland.

By connecting with university lecturers and professional experience leaders, the TECe team promotes the program using various mediums (e.g., flyers, YouTube clips, guest lectures) to recruit preservice teachers who are interested in doing a RRR professional experience. During this recruitment phase, the TECe Program leaders interview the preservice teachers to determine their career goals, aspirations, and desires in terms of where they would like to teach in Queensland.

Once in the TECe Program, the facilitators work with preservice teachers to support professional confidence, classroom experiences, ongoing mentorship, and targeted professional development as they continue their university studies. For instance, the TECe Program team offer professional development masterclasses on a range of targeted RRR topics, such as behaviour management, living and working in a rural community, trauma informed practices and information regarding professional experience bursary opportunities (e.g., Beyond the Range Professional Experience Grant) (Queensland Department of Education, 2024b).

A member of the TECe Program team meets with each preservice teacher (i.e., formal and informal discussions) to; (a) identify a 'best fit' RRR location for a professional experience, (b) support the coordination of a RRR professional experience (with the support of the university and RRR school site), (c) nurture preservice teachers' transition to being a teacher by securing employment with the Department of Education (after graduation), and (d), support and enhance preservice teachers' university studies. Concurrently, the TECe Program team liaises with RRR school leaders and university professional experience leaders to secure suitable RRR professional experience opportunities. The TECe Program team operates as a central point-of-contact where they actively connect with RRR school leaders, university leaders, and preservice teachers.

Research Design and Methods

The research explores the connections made because of the TECe Program. More specifically, it examines how innovative partnerships (i.e., TECe Program partnership with RRR high school leaders and universities) mitigate the challenges associated with recruiting high-quality teachers to RRR school communities. To build on the knowledge of the school leaders and partnerships in operation, Situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996) and Contingency Leadership Theory (Fiedler, 1993) framed the design of the research, and constructivist inquiry formed the methodology (Mertens, 2019). The project, in its entirety, encompasses the perspectives of FNQ high school leaders (n=9), a metropolitan college school leader (n=1), university professional experience leaders (n=2), and TECe Program preservice teachers (n=7). This paper reports specifically on the school leaders' combined responses (n=10) to the research question:

- What does the *TECe Program* do in relation to supporting, nurturing, and preparing teachers to teach in RRR schools?

As outlined in the conceptual framework section, the Essential Leadership Criteria (Fluckiger et al., 2014), and APSP (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014) further informed the semi-structured interview questions so the school leaders' expertise, ideas, and knowledge of their context, place, and circumstances could be shared (e.g., 'What are the significant contextual considerations for your school community?'). Questions relating to leadership approaches (e.g., 'Do you offer a pathway for employment across Far North Queensland region or your school?') provided scope for the leaders to discuss how they create, maintain, and sustain partnerships (i.e., how they partner with the TECe Program). The face-to-face interviews were conducted individually in Far North Queensland, transcribed, and analysed based on the theories outlined (analysis in NVivo). The emergent themes were thus identified and interrogated to inform the findings.

Findings and Discussion

The leadership strategies adopted to attract high quality teacher to RRR school communities were explored through this research. The data outlined how school leaders are enacting these strategies at a school level. Of these strategies, three key themes emerged: (1) leaders create partnerships around a shared philosophy; (2) leaders create and share their place consciousness; and (3), the leaders' actions are very intentional. We have reported on place consciousness and school leaders' intentionality previously (Thiele et al., 2023), however for this paper we expand on how partnerships, particularly partnering with the TECe Program, form part of the multi-dimensional staffing strategy.

The purpose of elaborating on this finding is to identify and discuss how these school leaders create and maintain partnerships as an innovative strength of their leadership and staffing plan. To do this, we expand on two sub-themes. The first outlines how school leaders intentionally establish and maintain key connections (an action) with key connectors (people) that include: the TECe Program; other school leaders; and university leaders. The second sub-theme outlines how the leaders' connections with the TECe Program are relationship orientated (using peer-supported and partnership-powered leadership strategies).

Key Connections (Actions) and Connectors (People)

The school leaders outlined how key connections and connectors were valuable conduits in their efforts to access quality teaching staff. Making connections was seen to being fundamental to their overall staffing strategy and the key connectors were identified as being school-based people "*that actually understand schools*" (Deputy Principal A). However, it was also identified that the strength of the connections "*isn't something that just sprung out of making relationships with other leaders*" (Principal B). The interview data illustrates that the school leaders adopt leadership strategies to intentionally sustain connections through partnerships centred around, (1) the TECe Program, (2) other school leaders, and (3), connections with universities, and more specifically with preservice teachers.

TECe Program. The *TECe Program* was identified as an integral part of a multi-dimensional staffing plan because of how the program explicitly connected preservice teachers to RRR school communities. The value of the connections created via the TECe Program was evident in *all* interview data. "*The TECe Program's ability to produce quality graduates that are dying to get to regional centers, it's been too hard to ignore.*" (Principal B)

The TECe Program leaders used relationship-orientated leadership strategies to create connections with RRR schools, universities and preservice teachers, and task-orientated leadership strategies while facilitating the program. Collectively, the professional mentorship created within the *TECe Program* connected stakeholders. For instance, the professional development offered provided specific information to help prepare preservice teachers for what it would be like living and teaching in a RRR community. This included explicit information on how preservice teachers can seek a RRR placement experience alongside practical information to help them understand (and overcome) possible placement challenges (e.g., funding challenges are negated by providing information about how to apply for *Beyond the Range Professional Experience Grant*—Queensland Department of Education, 2024b).

Many leaders also outlined the need for "*a real strong focus on Indigenous perspectives in our school culture*" (Principal G) because of the high percentage of First Nations students in the school, in the community, and more generally in the Far North Queensland region (18.8% average across the region, *see* Department of Education, 2023c). The Far North Queensland region has "*the breadth of student demographic that I believe is unrivalled—the challenges and the fabric of our school is something that is completely unique*" (Deputy Principal E). However, it was through the TECe Program and professional experiences that preservice teachers were able to prepare

for "*the little nuances in terms of being culturally sensitive*" (Principal G). The TECe Program explicitly foregrounded the opportunities *and* challenges to break down misconceptions and myths that are seen to be a barrier for preservice teachers' willingness to try a RRR placement (Halsey, 2018). This included "*the big things that graduates need to be aware of—pitfalls and benefits*" (Deputy Principal A) so that preservice teachers were well informed on "*what each of these schools offer*" (Principal C). For instance, the leaders outlined that there were "*Indigenous perspectives and sensitivities that they [preservice teachers] need to be aware of*" (Principal G).

The school leaders identified that they relied on connecting to the TECe Program to access quality teachers. The symbiotic relationships between the Program, school leaders and universities provided "*really important links*" (Principal I) to meet the staffing needs of the RRR schools.

> *I know that I can phone (TECe Program leader's name) and say I'm in dire straits. I need this, this, and this for next year or next term. Have you got any graduates for me whether they're coming up immediately, or even if I can hold over for six months? The TECe Program gives me that quality assurance that I'm not ...scraping the bottom of the barrel.*
> *(Deputy Principal F)*

The TECe Program was at the centre of these connections to the benefit of all stakeholders. The Program helped preservice teachers connect with RRR leaders (and teachers) based at a RRR school community. This supported a "*transition between university to career*" and helped preservice teachers get a sense of what teaching in a RRR school "*is going to look like for them.*" (Deputy Principal D). The connections between the TECe Program and the RRR school-based leaders (and teachers) were highly valuable as these social connections impact feelings of belonging and support. Whilst we understand that the quality of social relationships is related to psychological well-being (Roberts & Dunbar, 2015), we contend here that the quality of these connections heavily influenced a preservice teacher's openness to experiencing a RRR placement. The connections created within the TECe Program were founded on providing information and building a support network for the preservice teachers so that once they experience a placement at a RRR school, "*they've already got faces and names and can start making those social connections as well*" (Deputy Principal F).

Other School Leaders. The school leaders valued how the TECe Program helped them connect with school leaders from FNQ and other RRR leaders across Queensland. This finding supports Klar and colleagues' (2020) research that identified that RRR school leaders value connecting with their peers because of the shared understandings of RRR contexts or 'rurality' (Roberts et al., 2022b) and that these connections can provide socioemotional support. RRR school leaders valued how the *TECe Program* was a key connector for them, and they acknowledged the flow-on impacts of these connections: "*it's actually the relationships you build with your principals, because what happens is principals talk to other principals*" (Principal C). The TECe Program helped these leaders connect. "*And so, we've actually made some pretty good relationships with principals and leaders in other schools.*" (Principal B)

A shared staffing philosophy and the associated intentional actions of the RRR school leaders noted the importance of pursuing, building, and maintaining connections across various context. "*Because in the background, of course, is (another school leader's name) and (TECe Program leader's name) who have significant connections with significant people*" (Principal B). These connections with other school leaders helped support employment transitions and opportunities for preservice teachers.

Universities. "*What we like to do is they usually have a really strong connection with universities and have a huge amount of prac students.*" (Deputy Principal E). Participants identified the important role that a strong university partnership plays in attracting quality teachers to RRR locations. They outlined how it was the role of the school leadership team to work with

universities and the TECe Program to support placements in Far North Queensland. Additionally, the school leaders spoke about how important university connections and subsequent placement opportunities were, as they helped both the leaders/preservice teachers make informed decisions before offering/accepting employment.

Connecting and Connectedness: Pursuing, Developing and Maintaining Reciprocal Partnerships

The concepts of 'connections' and 'connectors' are crucial elements in the theory of contextually-situated leadership. What became evident was how each of the stakeholders actively sought, built, developed, and maintained connections with key connectors. These connections transitioned to a mutual, reciprocal relationship built and sustained by trust and obligation to act in each other's interest. Central to these relationships were the TECe Program leaders who, like the school leaders, developed the program to ensure high quality teachers in Australian RRR communities. This section outlines how the RRR school leaders pursued, built, and maintain connections with key connectors.

Pursuing Connections. Australia's current teaching shortage crisis (Castro, 2023; Department of Education, 2022) can have those charged with staffing schools rely on mechanistic processes that automate recruitment selection through centralised Human Resource systems. Yet, the approach taken by the RRR school leaders included brokering relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. "*it's been the relationships that are formed [through Queensland Secondary Principals Association]. And then all of us also starting to struggle with getting numbers [graduates] and people. So, we looked [at TECe] rather than just waiting.*" (Principal C)

The RRR leaders intentionally pursued connections and formed relationships to help address their school staffing needs. These relationships were deemed necessary if "*consolidation, new thinking and a radical departure from existing orthodoxies*" (Downes & Roberts, 2018, p. 32) was to emerge and increase the flow of teachers to RRR communities. "*I'll make that connection [to preservice teachers and the TECe Program], and just try to remove the barriers and the justifications [for preservice teachers] to say no [to a placement opportunity].*" (Principal I)

School leaders reflected on pursuing relationships with authentic and meaningful intent. This included connecting with universities that were geographically removed from their context. For instance, the school leaders outlined how they pursued connections with universities and preservice teachers by physically visiting campuses to talk about their region/school and/or offer employment information. Pursuing connections this way was seen to be "*far more effective than what was being mandated*" (Principal I) through centralised staffing systems. The university campus visits were costly, infrequent, and thus limited in terms of pursuing connections with preservice teachers, whereas participants shared stories of how efficient (and effective) it was to make connections and share information through the TECe Program. The connections and partnerships established enabled school leaders "*to be able to trust that they were accessing good quality graduates and could take them on sight unseen*" (Deputy Principal H).

The school leaders recognised a mutual and reciprocal relationship of trust and obligation, shared with a willingness to act prosocially (Dunbar, 2018). Trust was viewed as central because it underpinned everything from how they interacted with each other (I trust that you will not betray me) to their willingness to offer help (I trust that you will help me out one day) to trading (I trust that you are giving me high quality graduates). How these factors interact with one another impacts the extent to which their relationships and connections (network) can be utilized by those that belong to it to effectively achieve their professional objectives (Lopez Hernandez et al., 2022). Leaders were adamant that pursuing these types of relationships contributed to attracting quality graduates to RRR locations. However, they were also steadfast in their belief that pursuing the relationships was the initial step, but the building and developing of these partnerships was equally important.

Building/Developing Connections. Building partnerships and developing relationships across various stakeholder groups evolved as the leaders were "*trying something different*" to staff their RRR school (Downes & Roberts, 2018, p. 46). Building relationships was pivotal to the success of the connection, and the development of each stakeholder relationships developed over time because they were valued. "*Yeah, it's all about relationships here. They're all about relationships.*" (Principal G)

Leaders referred to how building partnerships (with universities, preservice teachers, schools, and the TECe Program) required time, understanding, effort, personable attributes, and belief in the partnership (Price, 2012). Due to the various challenges associated with moving to a RRR school community for a placement or teaching position (e.g., feelings of isolation), school leaders noted that developing relationships founded on personable attributes improved preservice teacher preparedness for teaching in a RRR community. They outlined how graduates required a personal connection and/or key contact to discuss their options—they needed more than an email from Human Resources if they were to consider undertaking a placement or teaching position in RRR locations.

> And their [HR] concept of a relationship is sending someone an email. You're asking someone to travel to the other end of the state… Pick up the phone and actually make an emotional connection with them or get on teams and ring them or zoom! (Principal I)

Relationships with, and in, RRR schools and communities entail knowing the context of the school community, while being deliberately conscious of 'place' (Roberts & Downes, 2019). The TECe Program and the school leaders were deliberate in their intent to support and ensure strong community connections were made and then experienced by preservice teachers well before they arrived in the RRR community. Yet it was the relational and emotional connections on-the-ground that made the real difference. For instance, school leaders developed relationships with the TeCe Program and other school leaders to offer various opportunities for preservice teachers (e.g., one principal noted that they encouraged preservice teachers to visit nearby schools, communities, or regions so they could get a sense of 'place' and how they could/would fit). This reflected the commitment that school leaders had to each other and to their region, emphasizing their priority of collaboratively problem-solving staffing issues. Viewed as collective staffing issue, the relationships functioned beyond regional boundaries. The value of working together and with their metropolitan colleagues was strategic. "*Leaders don't tend to come up to the Far North, but they do go the other way more often. So, you build up a network quite well across the state*" (Principal B)

School leaders highlighted examples where they would reach out to one another, including their TECe Program counterparts, when needing help to fill staff vacancies or help others fill their staff vacancies. At the same time these leaders would reach out to one another to access professional learning or discuss options for tackling issues. Peer support within the RRR education community was valued. Building and developing relationships is important, however the relationships can decay rapidly without the necessary requisites for maintaining them (Roberts & Dunbar, 2015).

Continuance/Maintaining Connections. Simon and colleagues (2019) outlined the benefits of peer support for school leaders as enduring professional relationships which were the result of a safe-space approach, in which trust had developed over time, and the support given was not only timely but custom-designed to suit the person and the context. Leaders in this study affirmed these propositions, particularly when having to contend with staff transience.

Transience forms an inherent aspect of the recruitment strategy of an RRR school. Teachers pursuing career goals in other schools or regions was common, and the leaders in this study shared stories of how they collaborated with their staff to cultivate a robust sense of place consciousness. A strong sense of place was seen as integral to beginning teachers being more likely to stay and immerse themselves in the culture and context of the school while they were

there. "*Because you get the foundation relationships and you get to know the kids; rather than that annual churn, or every two years where you do the turnover in those remote schools.*" (Principal I)

Understanding the costs of not maintaining these relationships was also evident. The level of commitment to a relationship is influenced by the satisfaction level with the relationship, the investments put into it, and the perceived availability of alternative choices (Roberts & Dunbar, 2015). These leaders drew attention to the importance of having a key contact as that person could maintain the connections across all the partnerships. The TECe Program contacts helped maintain relationships because "*they can provide the continual contact with the preservice teachers.*" (Deputy Principal A). The qualities, credentials, and connections of the key people mattered when maintaining partnerships.

Conclusion

This research paper foregrounds the critical role of the TECe Program and school leader connectedness in attracting quality preservice teachers to RRR school communities. It argues that the actions of key connectors in supporting connections—such as those established by the Program—help create relationships that shift the deficit discourse too often associated with RRR education. The TECe Program and connections were essential to a multi-dimensional staffing strategy. The findings highlight how this "*specific intervention*" (Guenther et al., 2023, p.5) helps prepare preservice teachers for a placement in a RRR school, and how the intentional actions of those involved (i.e., connecting school leaders to universities/preservice teachers) can support a flow of high-quality teachers to RRR communities.

This paper delves into how a group of school leaders, including those of the TECe Program, develop strong school/community/university partnerships as a strength of their leadership and innovation for establishing a workforce plan. The school leaders deliberately pursued, built, and maintained connections with key stakeholders, particularly those involved in the Program, to navigate and negotiate the complexity of the staffing issues they were facing. The professional connections created because of the Program were relational in nature. The leaders utilized peer-supported and partnership-powered leadership strategies to traverse the social and cognitive complexity of navigating the employment of high-quality teachers.

The limitations of this research are acknowledged, including the number of high school leader participants and their location in one region in the state of Queensland (i.e., only Far North Queensland leaders). However, we contend that the partnerships, relationships, and connections that were outlined mitigate the limitations as they all exceed the boundaries of the Far North region. More specifically, the school leaders outlined how the TECe Program partners with all regions across the state to ensure they can offer a wide-range of a place-based experiences for preservice teachers. Subsequently, the results of this research project could have implications for other regions.

The strength of the TECe Program and subsequent cross-school connections are reflected in the innovative and adaptive leadership strategies the school and Program leaders are enacting. The Program is championing RRR schools to preservice teachers as a value add to their Initial Teacher Education programs. The school and TECe Program leaders studied intentionally pursued, built, and maintained connections that were founded on reciprocity and trust. These relationships went beyond the bounds of "*connecting*" and became a key feature of their multi-dimensional staffing strategy.

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