



## “What does Place Bring to my Teaching?”: Professional Dissonance and the Development of Rural Consciousness

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### Abstract

Australia’s teacher shortage has reached critical levels, particularly in rural, regional and remote (RRR) areas. Searching for solutions to attract and retain teachers in RRR locations is fundamental to providing equitable access to education for all Australian children and young people. This phenomenological case study research takes a strength-based approach to promoting teaching in RRR locations to pre-service teachers, by investigating the professional, economic, cultural, social, and personal experiences of early career teachers working in RRR teaching positions. A thematic analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted which revealed the professional dissonance early career teachers experienced during cultural adjustment. Findings suggest ways early career teachers recalibrated their pre-conceived and accepted cultural norms from their places of origin to embrace and connect with community, both within school and the wider location. Thematic analysis further identified five broad areas participants contemplate prior to undertaking a teaching position in a RRR context: locational, emotional, social, cultural, and professional circumstances. These findings can be used for Initial Teacher Education providers to support their pre-service teachers to better understand the challenges and benefits of teaching in RRR contexts. In doing so, early career teachers would be better prepared to address the professional dissonance they will experience teaching in RRR locations through the development of a constructive rural consciousness. If more teachers can be attracted to RRR locations, then this will go some way to redressing the current imbalance and improve educational outcomes for children in diverse and marginalised RRR locations.

**Key words:** *Rural, regional, remote teaching; teacher education; early career teachers; rural consciousness; teacher attraction; teacher retention.*

### Introduction

The current staffing crises in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) schools demands the need for Initial Teacher Education providers to prepare and promote RRR locations to their pre-service teachers to ensure teachers are employed in RRR locations (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Teaching in a RRR context carries with it unique challenges and exceptional opportunities that are often difficult for graduate teachers to comprehend, particularly when pre-service teachers have no prior experience of these locations (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). For some time, RRR schools across all Australian states and territories have struggled to attract and retain teachers. This is due to several factors involving geographical location, access to services and a lack of understanding about adjusting to life in RRR locations (Young et al, 2018; Versland et al, 2022). This problem is exacerbated in Queensland since most Queensland schools (69%) are outside metropolitan regions (Department of Education, Queensland Government, 2023). Schools in hard to staff locations are turning to initial teacher education providers for assistance in employing new graduates so that they can staff their schools with pre-service teachers (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Due to the teacher shortage, schools have begun to employ teachers under Alternative Authority

to Teach contracts, whereby people who have not completed a teaching degree are employed as classroom teachers. In 2021, the Queensland College of Teachers received 888 applications from pre-service teachers to work in Queensland schools under an Alternative Authority to Teach to help meet staffing needs. Most Alternative Authority to Teach positions were granted in RRR contexts, which is another indication of the staffing crisis in these contexts (Queensland College of Teachers, 2022).

The current staffing crisis RRR schools are encountering highlights the need for initial teacher education providers to work with all stakeholders within education, to develop future educators to work across all sectors of education, particularly those in RRR locations, to their pre-service teachers. For some time, RRR schools across all Australian states and territories have struggled to attract and retain teachers (Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). By working with the Early Career Teacher Alumni, this phenomenological research addresses significant issues faced by early career teachers in RRR contexts. This research posits that sharing the lived experiences of early career teachers working in RRR locations, will provide opportunities to learn more about the challenges and opportunities afforded to teachers in RRR locations. For the study, early career teaching alumni are those who have graduated within the last five years and have taught for part or all of this time.

### **Literature Review**

Research into teaching in RRR schools has identified social, economic, professional, personal and cultural barriers to attracting teachers to RRR locations (Beutel et al., 2011; Herbert, 2020). Several initiatives have been developed to address barriers in RRR locations across these five domains. To negate social barriers such as personal and professional isolation, homesickness, and lack of amenities, many RRR school communities offer community-driven events and outdoor activities to ease the transition from urban living to life in RRR communities (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). A recent Queensland Government initiative established Centres for Learning and Wellbeing, which supports the wellbeing of staff and assists in the facilitation of inter-agency support for students and their families to settle in RRR locations (Education Queensland, 2020).

Economic barriers are another factor that often prevents pre-service teachers from experiencing teaching in RRR contexts (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Students undertaking RRR placements often cease employment for the duration of their placement and absorb increased costs of living in RRR contexts. Economic barriers such as the cost of living and travel expenses for RRR teachers are somewhat compensated through employers providing salary incentives (e.g., Remote Area Incentives Scheme), scholarships, and accommodation. Similar incentives are offered by government education departments across other states and territories within Australia to assist with study scholarships and relocation allowances.

When considering the professional barriers, there is great concern over the lack of opportunity for career advancement, professional development and the professional isolation teachers may experience in these locations (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Trinidad et al., 2014). Centres for Learning and Wellbeing were set up by the education department to provide professional learning and capability development for teachers and school leaders at all stages of their careers in rural and remote areas (including mentoring for early career teachers and individuals employed under permission to teach provisions). These centres have since been defunded, leaving further opportunities for professional growth in the hands of individual school administrators. With less certainty for career development opportunities for teachers in RRR locations, it seems that the perceived professional barriers to teaching in RRR locations will remain a concern.

Relocating to unknown locations can be burdensome for new teachers (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). The personal barriers they face, including foregoing family and friendship support networks and loss of access to services, can become detractors to life in RRR locations (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). Indeed, some have experienced the “*fishbowl effect*” (Kline et al., 2013, p. 8)

when living in small communities' and this limits the ability for teachers to spread their professional and personal wings (Kline et al., 2013; Miller & Haynes, 2016). Identifying intrinsic motivators are key in overcoming personal barriers, such as enjoying working with young people, intellectual fulfilment, satisfaction of contributing to society and providing positive role models (Versland et al., 2022; Young, 2017).

Adapting to cultural norms and expectations of life in RRR communities is a further challenge teachers face as these are often very different to the culture they experience in urban universities (Miller & Haynes, 2016; Versland et al., 2022). Research shows that immersion in the cultural and social activities of community is crucial in building connections and trust both within and outside of school (Miller & Haynes, 2016). Some initial teacher education providers run such immersion sessions for their pre-service teachers through extended guided visits to RRR schools and communities so that pre-service teachers have an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of life in RRR locations (Hudson et al., 2021). Immersion and connection are encouraged in most RRR schools, as they actively seek to appoint peer mentors for early career teachers, to assist them in transitioning from urban to country work and life. The need for mentoring to support early career teachers to remain in RRR contexts is clearly established in literature (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Mathew et al., 2017).

When reviewing the social, economic, professional, personal and cultural barriers teaching in a RRR location presents, it is clear there needs to be a greater focus on developing supports across these areas if the retention of teachers in RRR areas is to be improved. Extrinsic motivators such as monetary rewards and opportunities for career development are not sufficient alone to attract teachers to RRR areas. It appears intrinsic motivators such as enhancing personal, social and cultural awareness, coupled with a more relaxed lifestyle, seem to have a greater influence over a longer period to attract and retain teachers to RRR contexts (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Fransella et al., (2004) examined intrinsic motivators and developed a theory of "reasoned action" which discussed how one's attitudes, coupled with subjective norms, leads to a behavioural intention. In practice this means that any actions an individual may take are a function of both their attitudes and the norms of their culture and the social environment in which they exist. They found that knowledge on its own does not directly influence behaviour but serves to act as a modifier of attitudes and values. As this research seeks to delve into gaining a greater insight into the influence of attitudes and norms on adapting behaviours for early career teachers in RRR contexts, Fransella et al. (2004) concept of intrinsic motivators can be applied to the RRR context. Kelly and Fogarty (2015) recognise the influence of internal factors relating to personality traits and value systems have on overcoming negative emotions and feelings.

They identify rural consciousness as the development of an individual's attitudes and values, and capacity to adapt culturally, geographically and professionally. It may include knowledge, emotions, values and attitudes, all of which can be developed should the individual be willing. Kelly and Fogarty's (2015) work show previous attitudes and values may hinder learning and growth, or prior knowledge may contradict rural values. That is, pre-existing prejudices may hamper cultural adaptation and thwart social cohesion. They identify the lack of knowledge pre-service teachers have about teaching in RRR communities has led to a fear of teaching in RRR locations and acts as an emotional blocker to learning (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Cuervo and Acquaro (2018) found that rural placements can positively influence the attitudes of pre-service teachers toward RRR positions. Given their encouraging findings it follows more should be done to widen their engagement with RRR locations. If new opportunities can be provided for pre-service teachers to learn and experience RRR communities then they may be open to adopting new values and attitudes about RRR teaching. In this way pre-service teachers can be supported to develop a greater rural consciousness.

A Spanish study by Moreno-Pinillos (2022) of three RRR schools found that whilst some of these communities struggled economically, schools within these locations provided a sense of belonging by connecting with the environment. The study identified a sense of rootedness for teachers working within these schools and they attributed this to the relationships and interactions occurring specifically within the rural place. Studies conducted within Australia similarly found relationships and connection lied at the heart of RRR school communities (Roberts & Downes, 2019; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018) and invoked a strong sense of place. Research by Morrison & Ledger (2020) went further to suggest school leaders needed to actively engage with pre-service and early career teachers to develop relationships that helped to establish a connection to the RRR school and its community. Thiele et al., (2023) investigated this idea further by partnering with school leaders to actively promote RRR schools to pre-service teachers to deliberately generate interest in teaching within the RRR context. The importance of university and school partnerships in deliberately developing place consciousness with pre-service teachers to overcome staffing barriers for RRR schools was clearly evidenced (Thiele et al., 2023).

Recent research in the American rural context relating to teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools (Schutter & Lehman, 2024) similarly investigated the experiences of novice and pre-service teachers in rural schools. Their study noted similar issues with staffing and highlighted the need to establish a sense of belonging and connection to the community that was driven by the whole school community. Interestingly, Schutter & Lehman (2024) also found that pre-service and novice teachers' prior experiences impacted their motivation to undertake a rural placement and to stay within their new role in these rural communities. When considering the challenges RRR schools face recruiting and retaining teachers, establishing purposeful place consciousness with early career and pre-service and examining the impact on their rootedness to place, that is their sense of connection to place and the strength of the relationships they hold to those in the place, warrants further investigation.

Finding ways to highlight and embrace the rurality so that pre-service teachers recognise that teaching in a RRR context is very different, lies at the very heart of the model of teacher readiness to thrive in RRR locations (Hudson et al, 2021; White and Kline, 2012). This model focuses on four constructs that relate to teacher readiness. At the centre of the model is self-readiness, which interconnects with classroom readiness, school readiness and community readiness. The model highlights the need for pre-service teachers to understand and develop across all readiness constructs, so that they can thrive in RRR locations. Festinger's (1959) seminal works on cognitive dissonance may be applied to how a rural consciousness might be developed within pre-service teachers. He postulated that human beings have an inner drive to align their attitudes with their behaviours and avoid disharmony, or dissonance and coined the term cognitive dissonance. This term refers to conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviours that arise for a person because of an experience they have encountered. Later exponents of Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, notably Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019) identify the importance of creating cognitive dissonance through research to change people's attitudes and beliefs.

If pre-service teachers are exposed to experiencing the RRR teaching context then their existing beliefs can be challenged and effect their cognitive dissonance. If given the opportunity to gather new knowledge and re-interpret their understanding, then according to the cognitive dissonance theory, they will strive to effect change in their attitudes and behaviours towards teaching in a RRR location. This would support the development of a rural consciousness in pre-service teachers. If early career teachers know and understand that social, cultural, and economic capital in RRR contexts is different but not prohibitive to the types found in metropolitan areas (Versland et al., 2022) then they may be more willing to undertake RRR teaching.

The use of cognitive dissonance to foster rural consciousness and the importance of developing a sense of place rooted in relationships and connectedness for pre-service teachers is certainly worthy of further investigation. Understanding what drives and motivates people teaching in RRR locations and the changes they make to their values and attitudes to enable them to adapt to teaching in RRR locations, is critical to creating opportunities for pre-service teachers to widen their experiences and develop a rural consciousness.

If intrinsic motivators have a greater impact on behaviour than extrinsic motivators, then much more research is needed to investigate how to better develop these intrinsic motivators. What knowledge, attitudes, emotions and values are needed by teachers in RRR locations that will have a positive impact on their willingness to teach in these locations? It is clear more research needs to be undertaken to identify and understand the intrinsic factors of teachers working in RRR locations and how to increase longevity for teachers in RRR locations.

This paper seeks to explore the lived experiences of early career teachers who have taken up RRR teaching positions, with the aim of building an understanding and appreciation for RRR teaching amongst pre-service teachers through the sharing of the experiences of early career teachers working in RRR locations. Furthermore, understanding how challenges are navigated and highlighting the benefits can assist in promoting teaching in RRR locations to pre-service teachers. The phenomenological methods used within this study complement the notion of rural consciousness as it explores the cultural adjustments made by early career teachers. This study pays attention to their personal stories to offer insights into the development of a rural consciousness.

### Methodology

This research adopts a phenomenological approach that aims to inform and assist pre-service and graduate teachers to have a greater understanding and awareness of life in RRR communities (Ary et al., 2014). The lens of lived experience draws attention to the inequities and misinformation surrounding life in RRR locations (Madison, 2011). Examining the lived experiences of early career teaching alumni generates rich descriptions of the everyday complexities of living and learning (Mills & Morton, 2013). Giving voice to early career teaching alumni in RRR contexts and seeking to understand their lived experiences in these locations allows initial teacher education providers greater insight into teaching in RRR locations. Applying the lived experiences of early career teaching alumni enables the problematizing of the teacher staffing crisis in RRR areas to gain new insights to build a solution focused response to these issues.

If initial teacher education providers are to begin to encourage more early career teachers to choose to be employed in RRR communities, then it is crucial to change the negative rhetoric of disadvantage associated with RRR contexts. Specifically, this research addresses the following research questions:

- How do early career teaching alumni describe their experiences of cultural adjustment when taking up RRR appointments?
- What lessons learned from early career teaching alumni experiences can be conveyed to pre-service teachers to better prepare them for RRR locations?

Purposive sampling of alumni was used to invite early career teachers in RRR locations to take part in the research. Participants were early career teaching alumni who had graduated within the last five years and were teaching for part or all of this time. A corpus of 32 primary and secondary early career teachers working in RRR locations across Queensland returned the survey, and of these nine (n=9) participated in the follow-up in-depth case study interviews to share their RRR experiences. The survey collected quantitative data on participants relating to

their demographics and Likert ratings for their overall experiences teaching in RRR locations. The results of which are reported separately in another paper.

This paper reports on the results of the follow-up, in-depth case study interviews that investigated participants' personal, cultural, and professional experiences in the field. The in-depth interviews allowed the researchers to follow lines of inquiry that arose within conversations to generate a rich description of their RRR experiences. This approach aligns with an ethnographic case study design founded on the participants' cultural experiences (Mills & Morton, 2013) and undertaken in this research. The in-depth interviews allowed for a detailed insight into the behaviours, dispositions and interactions of people working and living in specific social and cultural environments (Mills & Morton, 2013), hence ethnographic in its construction. Since the investigation of the participants' cultural experiences and perspectives was the focus of the study, a case study approach that is combined with ethnography, is appropriate (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, delving into the participants' situational and contextual experiences that are outside of the control of the researcher, enables the retention of the participants' perspectives and reflects a case study design (Yin, 2018).

Interviews were conducted via zoom for approximately one hour and recorded, transcribed and member checked for accuracy. The interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended to allow a broad range of data to be gathered through the sharing of case study participants' diverse lived experiences relating to teaching in a RRR context (Gerring & Christenson, 2017). The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts was conducted in multiple iterations by the research team. Having more than one analyst added to the trustworthiness of the coding process. The first two rounds of thematic analysis revealed 14 and 21 topics of congruence. These topics were revisited and reorganized into seven themes, which were further refined to five remaining themes (Figure 1).

## Results

Nine early career teachers opted to take part in the in-depth interviews, five of whom were in remote communities, whilst the remaining four were in rural areas. All participants had worked in their context for at least one year, with three participants in their third year within the same school. Seven of the participants were teaching in the primary context, whilst the remaining two taught within secondary schools.

The five main themes and associated sub-themes are termed *considerations* in this study: locational, emotional, social, cultural and professional. Themes comprised topics participants felt were worthy of consideration when undertaking RRR teaching to recalibrate their preconceptions and adjust to teaching in the RRR context. Within each of these themes there emerged sub-themes which gave further meaning and clarity to the main theme and provided examples to give greater depth of understanding to the theme (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Overview of Thematic Analysis**

Locational considerations	Emotional considerations	Social Considerations	Cultural considerations	Professional considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• shopping</li> <li>• travel</li> <li>• accommodation</li> <li>• Beauty</li> <li>• Pace of life</li> <li>• Scarcity of resources</li> <li>• Internet access</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debrief network</li> <li>• internal &amp; external</li> <li>• Relationships &amp; rapport</li> <li>• communication</li> <li>• empathy</li> <li>• connecting to community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fish bowl</li> <li>• Personal investment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance - no judgement</li> <li>• Challenges</li> <li>• poverty</li> <li>• dress standards</li> <li>• communicating</li> <li>• sorry business</li> <li>• Benefits</li> <li>• teacher aids</li> <li>• living culture</li> <li>• bilingual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginning teacher support</li> <li>• Behaviour management</li> <li>• Pedagogies</li> <li>• Career progression</li> <li>• Personal goals</li> </ul>

### Locational Considerations

This theme was directly related to where the participants were located geographically and the logistics involved in managing their work and living arrangements.

Within the locational theme, geographical isolation was a dominant concern for participants, specifically relating to the costs and time it took to travel to the RRR school and to return to family during holiday time. Travel time was also a contributing factor to the inflated costs of goods and services, as these were factored in by providers and passed on to all consumers within the RRR community. Nine (all) participants also mentioned the lack of access to a range of consumer products that were not readily available to them in the RRR location, these included clothing, appliances, and furniture. For example, *“We don't have stuff and we all just make, do anyways”* (Participant D) and *“The reality hit that there isn't actually access to quite a lot of, uh, services that we used to along the coast.”* (Participant I)

They also noted the scarcity of *“luxury”* items and the importance of *“stocking up”* whilst away on holidays. In terms of access to services, all participants noted the difficulty they experienced establishing and maintaining reliable internet access. Six (n=6) participants cited examples of having no internet for several weeks, which contributed to their feelings of isolation, since their location was a contributory factor to the intermittent and unreliable service. Another common concern raised by participants was the lack of affordable housing, particularly if they had decided to stay within the area on a more permanent basis. However for whom accommodation was provided, were impressed with the standard of housing afforded to them. For example, *“It's nice accommodation. And it's very, very affordable...and I'm in this nice little two-bedroom unit, by myself.”* (Participant F)

In contrast to these concerns, all participants felt the beauty and serenity of their location often outweighed the locational challenges they faced. For example, *“I've done the trip over to the Gulf and just going inland just a little bit. It's amazingly red dirt. Stunning gum trees. Just the amazing landscape. There are waterfalls as well.”* (Participant A)

In addition, all nine participants (n=9) commented on the slower pace of life and felt the isolated location engendered a sense of calm and thoughtfulness within their daily lives. For example, *“The location is it's extremely isolated and it's closed off pretty much from the end of December through to about March by road”* (Participant G) There were some palpable benefits of isolated locations, including the aesthetic affordances of their surrounding natural environments and the wellbeing benefits of connection to land. Although many participants planned trips back to family and friends during school holidays, there was an evident appreciation and an attitude of ‘making the most of it’ in the dataset.

### **Emotional Considerations**

This theme was directly related to how the participants felt and the array of emotions they experienced that related to the RRR community in which they lived and worked and how they coped with these emotions.

As this second theme emerged from the data it focused on the emotional considerations' participants felt were essential when undertaking a RRR teaching position based on their experiences. Two major sub-themes emerged, those being the importance of both a debrief network and developing relationships and rapport with people within their school and wider community. Within the sub-theme of a 'debrief network' participants highlighted the need for both internal and external networks of support. Internal networks related to teaching colleagues and people living within the RRR community, whilst external networks related to friends and family who lived in another area/region and were not part of the RRR community where they taught and lived. Analysing the data between participants, revealed that as teachers lived in RRR longer, they increasingly relied on local support networks and their external supports diminished. As participants elaborated on relationships and support, they emphasised the need to develop constructive communication skills, both within and outside of the school community, as they felt this helped them to build empathy for their students and families and their colleagues. For example: *"I think just an easy-going sort of attitude, I suppose. Yeah, easy, easy-going, that you're adaptable, because things are changing. So pretty resilient. And able to communicate. Being able to get along with people"* (Participant A) and *"Understanding difference and making sure you have compassion for them (the kids) and understand where they're coming from"* (Participant B).

Furthermore, all participants stressed the critical importance of connecting to community and how this helped them to develop a respectful classroom environment. This sentiment is reflected in the following excerpts: *"I had to build a rapport with them and get that trust because they don't know how to trust because unfortunately, they've been let down so many times in their life"* (Participant C) and

*So, you've got to build that relationship where they've got a safe environment and you've got to do that. You've confronted with a lot of stories. Challenging behaviours. So, you've got to rely on your kind of workmates to be able to debrief and talk like that. (Participant G)*

### **Social Considerations**

The third theme to develop from the qualitative data was grouped under social considerations participants felt needed to be addressed. This theme related to how the participants perceived themselves within the RRR community within which they worked and lived. Within this theme were two major commonalities across all participants; the first was around understanding that their words and deeds would be scrutinised by the small communities in which they lived and worked. The following quotes provide insights into this important social consideration: *"Moving out here, just be careful of your social outings because it's small towns, lots of things go around and just thinking about, um, the cultural context of, a remote town."* (Participant B)

*"It's a fishbowl, right? Yeah, the people that you work with are the people that you socialize with, they're your family. And people like to talk about other people. It's as simple as that. And you don't, you don't, you don't you don't talk about anyone in the community, you don't talk about your teaching partners...You need to be really, really mindful of that, that everybody talks to everybody...you need to be mature."* (Participant F).

The need for social discretion and discernment was evident in the data. Anonymity is a luxury of a larger population, and as teachers became aware of the close social dynamics and scrutiny of small communities they adjusted their behaviours accordingly.



The second commonality across the social considerations theme was consistent advice from all participants to take the time to invest personally and professionally in the community, both within and outside of the school. For example, the following comment reflects their immersion into community life: “We go fishing a lot. Our freezer is always full of coral trout. The reef is 30 minutes to an hour away and you're catching big fish. So, I enjoy that.” (Participant A).

Participants couched their reasoning behind these two sub-themes as having a counter effect on some of the locational, emotional, and cultural challenges they faced living and teaching in an RRR location. In other words, the close-knit social context, along with the beauty of the location, helped them to enjoy the benefits of teaching in a RRR location.

### **Cultural Considerations**

The fourth theme related to cultural considerations as they had to adapt to the culture and life within the RRR community. The title for this theme arose out of the participants’ emerging understandings of the ideas, customs and societal behaviours expected within their RRR context. One of the major messages’ participants identified within this theme was the criticality of acceptance and how they needed to withhold judgement and assumptions. This theme particularly evidenced the need for RRR teacher to recalibrate their preconceptions. The following excerpt show how Participant A chose to withhold judgement:

*I think you've just got to be accepting of everybody. You know, everyone's the same. Everyone's on their own path to learn and own path of life. And I think that the less judgement of people... you know, still have high expectations, because you know, you've got to show respect. (Participant A)*

When reflecting on the cultural challenges they faced, participant responses were grouped into four areas relating to: poverty, dress standards, communication, and sorry business (periods of absence for family and kinship bereavement). These four factors influenced their student’s attendance and engagement with their schoolwork and teachers had to be mindful to be non-judgemental and accommodate the students so that they could achieve positive learning outcomes. For example:

*Kids turn up to school and they've got no shoes because there's no way to buy shoes in town or they can't afford to buy shoes or clothing, or even basic stationery for school. So, we supply a lot of that. So, I think getting used to all those kinds of things have been really hard and understanding that what we grew up with and the way we grew up is not the normal for out here. (Participant B)*

When examining the cultural benefits of their RRR setting, data showed teachers valued and relied on the knowledge and experience of their teacher aides, the exceptional bilingual skills of the community, and the deep learning they undertook as part of being immersed in a living culture within their RRR community.

*I get a full-time teacher aide with me, and they are local community members, and they are such a blessing for me in the respect that especially with cultural, you know, cultural, culturally appropriate things. I've got that massive support behind me”. (Participant F)*

Cultural adaptation and taking time to recalibrate preconceived ideas was important for teacher growth and development. RRR teachers who had experienced the collegiality of local community members felt supported in this way.

### **Professional Considerations**

The fifth and final theme is the professional considerations relevant to participants’ perceptions of their future teaching careers. These were divided into five key areas: beginning teacher support, behaviour management, pedagogies, career progression and personal goals. These five

sub-themes were interconnected to each of the other four themes (considerations) since their reasons for undertaking teaching in RRR communities, were based on their professional ambitions. To teach successfully in their RRR school, they needed to undergo continual reflection on their personal and professional experiences so that they could apply them to enriching their teaching and learning environment. The following excerpt exemplifies the success experienced through reflecting and growing in their teaching roles: *“I've learned to be a better teacher and be more time efficient to be able to do these things. And especially then I know the backgrounds of what goes into it too, to be able to support my kids.”* (Participant D)

Help-seeking and accessing available support was also vital to professional growth, as evidenced in the following extracts:

*You need to have the confidence, ... to ask for help when you need it, there is always help in a lot of these skills. They're very structured, especially for beginning teachers, um, and probably the confidence to go out and experience the town and meet new people.*  
(Participant B)

*There's a lot of staff here, like there's also a special education unit as well, who has a teacher, we have a full-time guidance officer as well. And there's just so much support, like in the staff here, we've had lots of teacher aides and behaviour management and stuff like that, which is really good.* (Participant F)

## Discussion

The findings from this research support those of earlier studies by Beutel et al. (2011) and Herbert (2020) since the major themes arising in this study closely align to those noted in these previous studies, namely emotional, social, professional and cultural dimensions. Interestingly, economic factors did not stand out as a theme in its own right but was part of a broader theme relating to locational considerations. Furthermore, the work of Kelly & Fogarty (2015) anchors this research by highlighting the importance of developing a rural consciousness. It is relevant to the findings of this study the five areas for consideration identified in the analysis, may reflect the growing rural consciousness of the early career teachers. Could this developing rural consciousness arise from intrinsic factors that drive early career teachers to choose to work in RRR locations? How might the development of a rural consciousness be supported so that schools in RRR locations have a sustainable, teacher workforce? Further investigation into the role external and internal rewards might play to incentivise teachers to undertake positions in RRR locations is warranted.

There is a strong sentiment of *difficult but positively rewarding* across all participant data, with strong recommendations to immerse oneself in the cultural, social, professional, and geographical (locational) opportunities. This paradox ‘difficult but positively rewarding’ yielded deeper understandings about students and their learning. Many participants had noted that they had never experienced living away from home or living in the country, so were keen to undertake these experiences. Interestingly, this need to ‘try something different’ by the alumni in this study contrasted with the findings of Schutter and Lehman (2024), who found pre-service and novice teachers from rural backgrounds were returning to rural areas to teach. Further research into the longevity of alumni in RRR locations and their prior knowledge and experience of RRR locations would give greater insights into how prior experience might contribute to the development of a rural consciousness.

Although participants were often negatively impacted by their location, in terms of resources and logistics, they all felt the benefits of immersing themselves in community had helped them to successfully adapt to living in their RRR locations. The participants within this study clearly chose to teach in a RRR context because they were interested in RRR communities, were keen to undertake such a personal challenge and wanted to make a positive contribution to RRR communities. These three factors were similarly identified by Lock et al (2012) along with two

other factors which were they were invited to apply, or they were inspired by a university placement as a pre-service teacher.

While all participants indicated teaching in RRR contexts was very emotionally taxing, there was still high positivity towards teaching in a RRR setting. When considering the social barriers beginning teachers faced in RRR contexts, one would expect the geographical isolation to be felt socially too. Interestingly this was not so in the case study participants, as they were constantly involved in community events and found it was a culturally enriching experience. Participants did not find RRR teaching experiences socially isolating as they had overcome perceived social barriers by immersing themselves in their communities, both within and outside of school. Overcoming barriers through community immersion aligns to the findings of Roberts and Downes (2019) and contributed to the well-being of pre-service and early career teachers in these RRR locations.

The way that the participants within this study immersed themselves in community activities and connected with students and their families outside of school was a crucial factor in their enjoyment of teaching within the RRR context. Participating in community events enabled the teachers within this study to establish meaningful connections and laid the foundations for building a strong sense of place, supporting the findings of Wieczorek & Manard (2018). Such community activities involved attending and organising community events like barbecues, and enjoying the natural environment while hiking, fishing and swimming. Taking part in such activities enabled teachers to ground themselves with the environment and make deep connections to their sense of place. This grounding reflects the notion of rootedness Moreno-Pinellos (2022) identified in her study and supports the need for school leaders to actively provide opportunities for pre-service and novice teachers to engage with the wider community and environment, indeed, to establish a sense of place. These findings resonate with claims raised by Hudson and Hudson (2019) that successful teaching in RRR communities was dependent on teacher engagement with community. That is, teachers who enjoyed RRR placements were supportive, engaged, and valued the community in which they were situated.

In RRR contexts the connections between school students and their cultures are salient, enriching the early-career teachers' understandings about how students learn and the importance of connecting education with context and experience. Evidently, local connections are critical to teachers surviving and thriving in RRR contexts encompassing relational, social, professional, community and geographical connections. These connections are formed through immersion in culture and community, and help to overcome the cultural, social, and professional dissonances experienced by early-career teachers who are new to RRR contexts. Several studies have focused on the need for mentoring to support early career teachers to remain in RRR contexts (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Mathew et al., 2017) and in this current study, much mention was made about the importance of connecting to colleagues and being both formally and informally mentored to help adapt to life in the RRR context. These deliberate mechanisms school leadership undertook supports the call to arms of Morrison & Ledger (2020) and demonstrates the positive impact such deliberate actions can make on supporting early career teachers to teach in a RRR setting. Furthermore, this intentional support from school leaders and colleagues added to increasing their sense of belonging and preparedness for RRR teaching and life and contributed to their motivation to remain in the RRR community. A finding strongly reflected by Schutter and Lehman (2024) in their study within the rural context in America.

Regarding professional issues discussed by participants, they thought their experiences in RRR settings developed them as professionals and they found their experiences very rewarding. Participants all highlighted the enjoyment they found from working with young people and felt they were making a valuable contribution to their school communities. This finding aligns with the work of Young (2017) who identified these intrinsic motivators as essential elements for teachers who thrived within RRR settings. These similar motivators for the participants within

this study seem to have contributed to their high positivity regarding teaching in the RRR context.

The aim of this research was to build understanding and appreciation for RRR teaching for pre-service teachers through sharing experiences and storytelling from early career teacher graduates working in RRR locations. In terms of building the capacity of pre-service teachers to undertake RRR teaching positions through vicarious experiences of alumni, five key areas of consideration emerged: locational, emotional, social, cultural, and professional. For each of these areas, it appears that beginning teachers had to recalibrate their pre-conceived and accepted cultural norms from their places of origin to embrace and connect with community, both within school and the wider location. Embracing this dissonance is a key finding of the study. Teacher recommendations in the datasets demonstrate the need for beginning teachers in RRR contexts to review and adjust their own assumptions and expectations to adapt to teaching and living in their RRR contexts. The way the participants within this study positioned themselves within the RRR context furthers the work of Walker-Gibbs et al (2018) relating to shaping their identity and understandings as a teacher. This concept causes teachers to rethink their identity from what they bring to the RRR context, to what place brings to teachers (Walker-Gibbs et al, 2018). In effect, the rural dissonance many teachers within this study experienced, led to the development of what Kelly and Fogarty (2015) termed rural consciousness, and helped the teachers to be better prepared for work and life in RRR communities.

This research successfully answers the research questions for the study, in that the findings clearly tell the story of the experiences of early career teaching alumni and the cultural adjustments they made. Furthermore, analysing their stories provides five themes for teachers to consider enabling them to transition smoothly into teaching in RRR locations.

The personal stories and experiences this study provides can be shared with pre-service teachers to widen their understanding of teaching in RRR communities. Learning about the experiences of their peers will act to demystify RRR teaching for pre-service teachers, by challenging their existing beliefs and creating cognitive dissonance and the opportunity for them to adopt new values and attitudes about RRR teaching through the insights this research affords.

The five considerations identified through this research, those being locational, emotional, social, cultural and professional, will provide further understanding of the knowledge, attitudes, emotions and values that are needed by teachers in RRR locations to enable them to thrive in the teaching profession. The recommendations and considerations that emerged from this research offer an overview of how these reflections might be put into action so that beginning teachers develop place-based consciousness and can thrive in various RRR contexts. Recalibrating thinking patterns from “*what do I bring to RRR teaching?*” to “*how can place enrich my teaching?*” needs to occur for early career teachers to thrive in RRR locations. Employers and education providers cannot assume that pre-service teachers have the skills to recalibrate preconceived ideas. Skills of reflection and recalibration to teach in diverse places ought to be foregrounded in education programs so they are not assumed or taken for granted.

A limitation of this study was that it did account for participants’ prior experience in RRR communities, either through personal life or a university placement, and is certainly an avenue for further exploration in the future. The positivity of participants in this research may indeed reflect a limitation of this study. The purposive sampling method targeted RRR alumni to share their RRR experiences with pre-service teachers, hence perhaps attracted those who were invested in the betterment of their profession and in pre-service teachers education at their university as active alumni. It may not then come as a surprise their stories bore out a positive message to their peers to consider RRR teaching. Additionally, the small sample sizes may have positively skewed the results from this research.

Further research could delve into the background and life experiences of the respondents working in RRR contexts, to find if there was a correlation between campus of origin and life experiences and willingness to embrace teaching in RRR communities. It would be interesting to investigate if students from regional campuses were more likely to take on RRR positions than their urban counterparts. Further problematizing the teacher shortage in RRR communities is required to investigate what needs to be done to attract pre-service teachers and early career teachers from urban areas to RRR communities and how might they recalibrate their cultural norms so that they may thrive in the RRR context.

### **Conclusion**

When considering the teacher shortage in RRR communities there is a pressing opportunity to leverage the experiences of recently graduated teacher alumni to better prepare pre-service teachers who are considering RRR teaching positions. Giving voice to the lived experiences of early career teaching alumni and examining the challenges and benefits of teaching in RRR contexts with those who are currently working in these spaces, provides pre-service teachers with vicarious experiences of teaching in RRR communities. By watching and listening to the stories of others, pre-service teachers can observe, understand, and empathise with early career teaching alumni who might have similar backgrounds and life experiences to them, and are thriving in RRR contexts. This positive reinforcement of the capabilities of beginning teachers invokes a strength-based approach to teaching in RRR communities and will enable pre-service teachers to consider the possibilities open to them to teach in a RRR context.

Through sharing vicarious experiences and storytelling, this research will help to build understanding and appreciation for RRR teaching in pre-service teachers. In doing so initial teacher education providers can better prepare pre-service teachers to navigate the cultural, social, and professional dissonance they will experience in RRR locations to enable them to recalibrate their views of cultural norms. Sharing the voices of early career teaching alumni with pre-service teachers may go some way to attract beginning teachers to work in RRR contexts. By ensuring schools in RRR locations have a full complement of teaching staff, including new graduates who are ready to teach in RRR schools, will no doubt positively support the learning experiences of children in these areas. Building connections and pathways to teaching in RRR locations will go some way in part, to providing equitable educational opportunities for RRR communities.

The results of this initial study have been used to broaden pre-service teachers understandings of and preparedness for teaching in RRR locations by informing initial teacher education courses. The research achieved its aim to build a greater understanding and appreciation for RRR teaching through the sharing of the experiences of early career teacher graduates working in RRR locations. The participants within this research have shared their journey in developing a greater rural consciousness and enabled the researchers to explore the cultural adjustments made by early career teachers. This study pays close attention to the personal stories of participants to offer insights into the development of a rural consciousness.

The work to attract graduate teachers to RRR communities is one of critical ethical importance to initial teacher education providers as we seek to reduce the reliance on alternative authority to teach applicants in RRR schools. If more teachers can be attracted to RRR communities, then this will go some way to redressing the current imbalance and improve educational outcomes for children in diverse and marginalised RRR schools.

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