Don't Stand Up in a Hammock: Advice from Early Career Teachers in Remote, Regional and Rural Locations

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Abstract

This ethnographic case study investigates the professional, locational and cultural understandings teachers need when beginning regional, rural, and remote teaching and living. Drawing from the experiences of recently graduated early career teachers in regional, rural, and remote teaching positions, the study sought to identify key learnings and strategies for surviving and thriving in regional, rural, and remote communities with the aim of better preparing pre-service teachers for placements and future employment in these locations. Most early career teachers in this study would recommend regional, rural, and remote teaching positions to pre-service teachers, describing the experience as rewarding, challenging and professionally developing. The importance of building relationships and immersing oneself in community were salient in the data. Analysis revealed a need for pre-determinations in five areas when preparing for RRR teaching positions: social (building networks and making friends), geographical (exploring the local area and getting involved in community), emotional (positive mindset and getting out of your comfort zone), personal (healthy habits and resilience), and cultural (understanding community). There is an evident opportunity to help pre-service teachers prepare for regional, rural, and remote experiences by considering these five pre-determinations.

Keywords: *Rural, remote, teacher education, ethnography, early career teachers*

Background to the Study

This project aims to investigate the cultural, social, and professional experiences of University of the Sunshine Coast alumni working in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) teaching positions to identify how we can best prepare pre-service teachers for RRR locations. There have been recent calls to better prepare pre-service teachers for RRR teaching (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Roberts et al., 2022; Willis & Grainger, 2020), and this is particularly important for the University of the Sunshine Coast as the majority of Queensland schools (69%) are outside metropolitan regions (Queensland Department of Education, 2023). Since many Initial Teacher Education programs are in urban areas with predominantly urban students, graduate teachers need more understanding and connection to schools and life in RRR communities (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Boylan & Wallace, 2007; Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018). However, it is well known that teaching in an RRR context can be fraught with challenges (discussed below), and for some time, RRR schools across all Australian states and territories have struggled to attract and retain qualified teachers (Halsey, 2018; Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015).

One of the initiatives adopted in Queensland to address the teacher employment and retention problem in RRR contexts is the Queensland College of Teachers Permission to Teach program (Queensland Government, 2005). This is a transactional arrangement where pre-service teachers are paid to work while they study. Another transactional initiative is the Queensland Government's Turn to Teach program (Queensland Government, 2023), where pre-service teachers are employed in paid internships in difficult-to-staff areas. Many of these Permission to Teach or Turn to Teach arrangements are in RRR contexts, and there is an evident need to prepare pre-service teachers for the cultural, social, and professional demands of RRR teaching contexts. In response to this situation, the authors conducted an ethnographic study of teachers' cultural experiences in RRR contexts to articulate lessons learned about how early career teachers survive and thrive in these locations.

Literature

As an ethnographic theoretical framework informs this study, this literature review investigates what is known about locational and cultural understandings and knowledges needed for teaching in RRR schools and communities. Early career teachers in RRR locations experience steep learning curves professionally and culturally. In RRR contexts, teachers work hard to understand rurality and adapt curriculum resources appropriately to make learning meaningful for students (Schulz, 2017; Versland et al., 2022), but in addition to these challenges, they often also experience cultural adjustments concerning living in rural, remote and/or regional locations (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Young et al., 2018). These challenges include understanding rural community dynamics, difficulties establishing new relationships in some communities, having little anonymity, and feeling isolated (Downes & Roberts, 2018).

There are similarities between Downes and Roberts (2018) description of the need to understand and adapt to rurality and Kelly and Forgarty's (2015) expressed need for rural consciousness. Both concepts—understanding rurality (Downes & Roberts, 2018) and a rural consciousness (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015)—are underpinned by an individual's attitudes and values and capacity to adapt culturally, geographically and professionally. A rural consciousness (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015) comprises knowledge, emotions, values, and attitudes, which can be developed depending on the individual's dispositions. Understanding rurality (Downes & Roberts, 2018) includes contextual and community knowledge and how to develop relationships in RRR settings. Kelly and Fogarty's (2015) work shows that pre-existing attitudes and values may prevent learning and growth, or prior knowledge may contradict rural values. For example, pre-existing prejudice may hinder cultural adaptation and social cohesion. However, rural placements can positively influence pre-service teachers' attitudes toward RRR positions (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018). Therefore, the tensions experienced by RRR teachers within their knowledge and values systems (like Marzano & Kendall's (2007) self-system) may thwart their RRR experiences and the development of their understanding of rurality. Young et al.'s (2018) research showed that RRR placements for pre-service teachers challenged preconceptions and positively changed attitudes toward rural communities. Nevertheless, not all teachers adapt to RRR geographies; some remain outsiders.

Schulz (2017) investigates the dispositions of outsider teachers working in remote Indigenous locations in Australia. She profiles such teachers as "*missionaries, mercenaries, tourists and misfits*" (p. 211) and signifies the risk of perpetuating '*othering*' in these communities. Othering perpetuates binary them and us or haves and have-nots mentalities, and reinforces colonial or white discourses (Schulz, 2017). When newcomers bring with them prejudices (pre-judgements) about rural communities (e.g. Young et al., 2018), including assumptions about having superior knowledge because they come from more populated geographies, they perpetuate negative stereotypes of people in RRR communities and impede their own an understanding of rurality

and development of rural consciousness. Schulz's (2017) work demonstrates the pressing need for decolonising teacher education so that new teachers in RRR communities refrain from assuming superior knowledge because they come from more populated geographies.

It is also important to distinguish between attraction and retention in RRR locations. Although many are initially attracted by financial or professional incentives (e.g. Teach Queensland Rural and Remote Benefits, Queensland Government, 2023) and/or the adventure of living in a remote location (Schulz, 2017), Kelly and Fogarty's (2015) research showed that a rural consciousness was an important factor for teacher retention in RRR locations. Many incentives are transactional, where teachers exchange their time in remote contexts for financial benefits. Versland et al.'s (2022) study in the USA also showed that teachers were attracted to rural locations because of financial benefits. Smaller class and school sizes, the welcome of the community and proximity to family are also attractants, and Versland et al. (2022) acknowledge that these findings accord with Boylan's (1993) previous research amongst experienced RRR teachers in Australia that showed a gravitation toward forming strong relationships with students and community. That is, experienced teachers in RRR contexts had strong relationships with the people and geographies of those places. Boylan (1993) proposed a model of teacher retention (Figure 1) that had four spheres—the teacher, the classroom, the school, and the community—much like Bronfenbrenner's (1976) socioecological model of development. These four spheres of retention address motivations and connections at the micro/individual level, out to classroom relationships, connections, and relationships in the school community, and the wider community.

Figure 1: Boylan's (1993, p. 124) Model of Teacher Retention
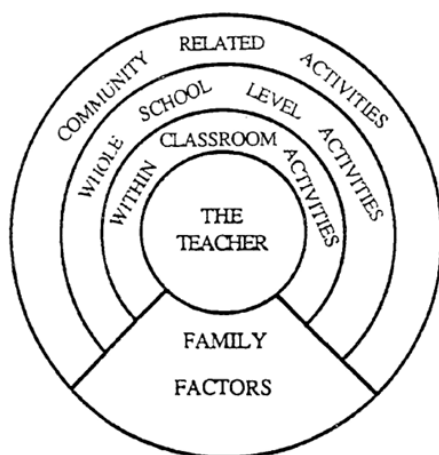
Teachers' decisions to stay or leave RRR locations are complex and varied (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015) and may be personal or systemic or an interplay between personal and systemic influences and cultures (Boylan, 1993). The Versland et al. (2022) study noted the influence of the school administrator (principal) on teachers' decisions to stay in or leave RRR locations. Public perceptions of teaching in RRR communities may also influence teachers' decisions. For example, the 2018 Halsey Report into Regional, Rural and Remote Education in Australia raised the issues around the perception that "*the country is a good place for a teacher to start their career but not to devote their career to*" (p. 38). The Halsey (2018) report uncovers public perception that RRR schools are training grounds for early career teachers and that RRR students rarely have experienced teachers. These perceptions also reinforce the idea that RRR appointments are temporary, lowering expectations for stable staffing in RRR areas (for example, Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018). Halsey (2018) praised the exceptional work of teachers in RRR schools across Australia and highlighted the need for "*highly effective teachers and teaching*" (p. 38) at all levels of schooling.

Altogether, there is an evident need to raise awareness of RRR contextual considerations amongst pre-service teachers before they graduate to better prepare them for their possible futures (Beutel et al., 2011; Hudson & Hudson, 2019; White, 2019). White (2019) calls for better preparation of pre-service teachers to work *in*, *for* and *with* rural communities, which resonates with Kelly and Fogarty's (2015) notion of rural consciousness. Teaching as collaboration *with* community is not self-evident to many inexperienced teachers (White, 2019). Many universities, including the one in this study, provide immersion experiences for pre-service teachers, which have been shown to affect attitudes toward RRR contexts positively. Through these experiences, pre-service teachers better understand the connections between schools and communities and the centrality of relationships in RRR practices (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). These findings point to the need for pre-service teachers to be prepared so they are confident to build new relationships in RRR communities.

Notwithstanding, employers cannot assume pre-service teachers will possess emotional, social and cultural capacities for RRR contexts, nor can they rely on the personal resilience of individuals (Willis & Grainger, 2020). Case study research into the wellbeing of four teachers in very remote locations in Western Australia and Queensland (Willis & Grainger, 2020) called for a framework for understanding remote teachers thriving so that systems are not unduly reliant on individual capacities and resilience. In 2012, Bourke et al. proposed a framework for understanding remote health in Australia, but a framework for RRR education is yet to be developed. This paper makes contributions to knowledge that may assist the future development of an RRR education framework in Australia.

Methodology

This is an ethnographic case study of the cultural experiences (Mills & Morton, 2013) of recently graduated teachers from the University of the Sunshine Coast in RRR locations in Queensland, Australia. Ethnography is useful for understanding ways of working and living as it studies social behaviours, dispositions, and interactions (between people and their environments) in particular fields and generates rich descriptions of the everyday complexities of living and learning (Mills & Morton, 2013). This research investigated the cultural experiences and perspectives of recently graduated (bachelor and masters) early career teachers using survey research, including annotated photographs and follow-up interviews within the case study. Case study methodology is paired with ethnography in this study because an in-depth investigation of a cultural experience within a context (Yin, 2018) was needed. That is, an investigation of the cultural experiences of early career teachers in RRR locations (ethnography) who are alumni of the University of the Sunshine Coast (the case) (Miles et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). Case study research typically investigates a situation over which the researcher has little or no control, intending to retain holistic and real-world perspectives (Yin, 2018).

This research takes up the stance of critical ethnography (Madison, 2011) as the researchers advocate for pre-service and early career graduate teachers to share stories and give voice to cultural experience in RRR locations (Madison, 2012). Critical ethnography resists unfairness and seeks greater equity (Madison, 2011), in this case, giving voice to early career teachers and seeking to understand their cultural experiences in RRR placements rather than repeating the rhetoric of systems and employers in hard-to-staff places. This ethnographic research develops a cultural portrait that draws together the experiences of early career teachers working in RRR locations in an effort to encourage and equip more early career teachers to take up positions in these RRR locations. Accordingly, the study addresses the research question: What professional, locational and cultural understandings do teachers need when beginning regional, rural, and remote (RRR) teaching and living? The research question guided the development of the survey instrument (Appendix A). The focus of this paper is on the survey findings as part of the ethnographic case study. Interview and photographic data are not included in this paper.

Data Collection

Purposive sampling of University of the Sunshine Coast alumni (the case) was used to invite early career teachers in RRR locations to complete a mixed methods survey administered in Qualtrics. Invitations were sent to 615 early career teachers who had graduated from the university in the last three years. Of this number, 240 had graduated in the last year, and 32 alumni responded to the survey. Not all those who received an invitation would have been teaching in an RRR context, so some would have discarded the invitation. Further, the survey was voluntary; therefore, some RRR teachers who chose not to participate could have discarded the invitation. The researchers manually checked the validity of responses to ensure survey responses came from teachers working in RRR contexts. Incomplete returns were discarded from the dataset. The online survey allowed teachers to respond in their own time. The survey was open for three months in 2022. Participants were given a definition of terms at the beginning of the survey to identify if their school was defined as rural, regional, or remote. Furthermore, the survey asked for school demographics, such as location and population, to verify they were teaching in an RRR context. The survey questions were closely aligned with the research questions so that data analysis could accurately respond to the research questions.

It ought to be noted that the University of the Sunshine Coast is a regional university in Queensland that actively promotes RRR experience in placements. Therefore, responses to the survey questions may reflect previous regional education experience. Anecdotally, this is considered a strength of the University, but further research would be needed to compare graduate teachers' RRR experiences between universities.

Survey Instrument

Participants were invited to complete a short (approximately 20-30 minute) online survey to share their experiences of working in RRR locations (Appendix A). The survey comprised seven demographic items, 13 five-point Likert-style rating items, seven open-ended short answer items, and a facility to upload photographs that depict RRR experiences. The photograph findings are not presented in this paper due to the size of the data.

Demographic items investigated career/professional and RRR demographics, including years teaching, years teaching in RRR locations, level of schooling (primary, secondary or both for specialist teachers), government or non-government employer, highest level of education, and an item about career stage (e.g., young professional or career changer).

The Likert-style survey items were developed according to the *a priori* themes of the research question: professional, locational, and cultural understandings needed for RRR teaching and living. The open-ended questions were intentionally worded according to the context of this study, investigating lessons learned and tips for pre-service teachers to survive and thrive in RRR contexts. The survey was designed by one of the research team members within these parameters and checked by the other members of the research team for validity.

Open-ended response items solicited advice for surviving and thriving in RRR communities, lessons learned about RRR teaching, intentions for their length of stay in RRR communities, and metaphors for RRR work and life.

Data Analysis

There were 32 returned surveys. Hence, descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken, looking specifically for numbers of responses, percentage distributions and means among the sample. Results were tabulated and graphed for comparison. Quantitative data analysis was undertaken in Qualtrics™ software and using MS Excel™ spreadsheets. There are minor variations in the total number of responses in some survey items, as participants could skip items. These were coded as missing data and excluded from analysis.

Cross-tabulation analyses were conducted to investigate responses to Likert-style questions by demographic features: remote, regional and/or rural locations; primary and/or secondary schools; years of teaching experience; stage of career (e.g. young professional, mature aged); and highest qualification. Highest qualification and level of schooling data could not be compared due to low counts in some categories (masters n = 8; secondary n = 11). Career changers were excluded from the stage of career data due to low numbers (n=5), as were first-year teachers from years of experience data (n=4).

Open-ended qualitative survey items were analysed using manual colour coding. A code was kept if there were data from three or more participants. Codes were initially organised into emergent themes in the first round of analysis (Miles et al., 2020). In a second round of analysis, they were abstracted and tabled in *surviving* and *thriving* categories in accordance with the intent of the survey and following Miles et al.'s (2020) qualitative data analysis protocols. This analysis revealed a flow between the two meta-categories, thriving and surviving, which is explained below.

Quantitative Results

Survey participants were asked to describe their geographical location in relation to distance by road from the coastline. Participants could choose more than one description for their location: remote, regional, and rural (Table 1).

Table 1: *Participants' geographical RRR locations*

Description of Geographical Location	n	%
REMOTE. Ten (10) or more hours' drive from the Queensland coast between Brisbane and Cooktown, or one (1) or more hours' drive north or northwest of Cooktown.	17	53%
REGIONAL. Between one (1) and nine (9) hours' drive from Brisbane.	13	41%
RURAL. A regional or remote area where agricultural, pastoral, or mining industries are dominant.	17	53%

The average time teaching in RRR locations for the participant group (n=32) was one (1) year and nine (9) months (min: four months; max: 3 years 4 months). Table 2 profiles participants' career demographics. Most participants were in their second or third years of teaching (44.83% in each respective year). Nearly one-third (62.5%) were primary school teachers, 31.24% were secondary school teachers, and 6.25% were teaching at both levels of schooling (e.g. specialist music teachers). The distribution, according to level of schooling, aligns with the number of primary and secondary schools in RRR Queensland (Queensland Government, 2021). All but one were teaching in government schools. The highest qualifications were Bachelor (75%) and Master of Teaching (25%) degrees. Most participants were working their first professional jobs, with 46.88% describing themselves as young professionals and 37.5% describing themselves as mature-aged students in their first job out of university. Only 15.63% described themselves as career changers, having had previous professional jobs.

Table 2: *A Profile of Participants' Early Teaching Careers*

	Per cent	Number
Years of teaching experience		
First-year	10.34%	3
Second year	44.83%	13
Third year	44.83%	13
Total	100%	29
Level of schooling		
Primary	62.50%	20
Secondary	31.25%	10
Both (e.g., specialist teachers)	6.25%	2
Total	100%	32
Government or non-government school		
Government	96.88%	31
Non-government	3.13%	1
Total	100%	32
Stage of teaching career		
I'm a young professional, and this is my first job out of university	46.88%	15
This is my first job out of university, and I was a mature aged student	37.50%	12
I'm a career changer, I've had other professional jobs (that required a university degree) before	15.63%	5
Total	100%	32
Highest degree		
Bachelor	75.00%	24
Master of Teaching	25.00%	8
Total	100%	32

The above demographics in Tables 1 and 2 are used for cross-tabulation analyses below. Responses to Likert-style agreement items showed an overall positive view of RRR teaching. Although most participants agreed that teaching in RRR contexts was 'challenging' (96.88%), they also described the experience as 'rewarding' (96.77%), professionally developing (96.77%), and culturally enriching (90.33%). These statistics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *Participants' Positive and Negative Agreement Ratings*

Survey item 16: Teaching in RRR contexts is...	Agree	Disagree	Total N
Rewarding	96.77%	3.23%	31
Developing me as a professional	96.77%	3.23%	31
Culturally enriching	90.33%	9.68%	31
Challenging	96.88%	3.13%	32
Socially isolating	43.34%	56.67%	30
Emotionally taxing	75.01%	25.01%	32

Crosstab analysis of Table 3 data according to RRR locations revealed consistency of responses across remote, regional, and rural locations (see Appendix B). Third-year RRR teachers (n=14) were more likely to report agreement with RRR experiences being 'socially isolating' and 'emotionally' taxing (57.2% and 78.6% respectively) than their second-year RRR counterparts (n=13) (27.3% and 69.3% respectively). There may be a relationship between years of service and negative social and emotional experiences. This warrants further research.

Similarly, mature-aged graduates (n=13) were also more likely to report agreement that teaching in RRR contexts is 'socially isolating' and 'emotionally taxing' (53.8% and 84.7%, respectively) compared to young professionals (n=16) (40% and 68.8% respectively). Again, these descriptive statistical findings point to a need for further research into the relationship between negative social and emotional experiences and stage of career and life.

The analysis also revealed an overwhelming majority of RRR teachers indicated they would recommend teaching in RRR contexts for first year graduates (90.32%; n = 28). Figure 2 presents data according to ratings of agreement, showing 61% of participants (n = 31) strongly agree that they would recommend RRR teaching positions to pre-service teachers. Although this dataset is not representative of all RRR teachers in Queensland, the high endorsement of RRR teaching positions is noted.

The most substantial agreement ratings for recommending a first-year RRR position in the case came from teachers working in remote locations (88.9%, n=17) and young professionals (93.3%, n=15).

Figure 2: *Percentage Distribution of Participants' Agreement to Recommending RRR Teaching Positions to Pre-service Teachers*
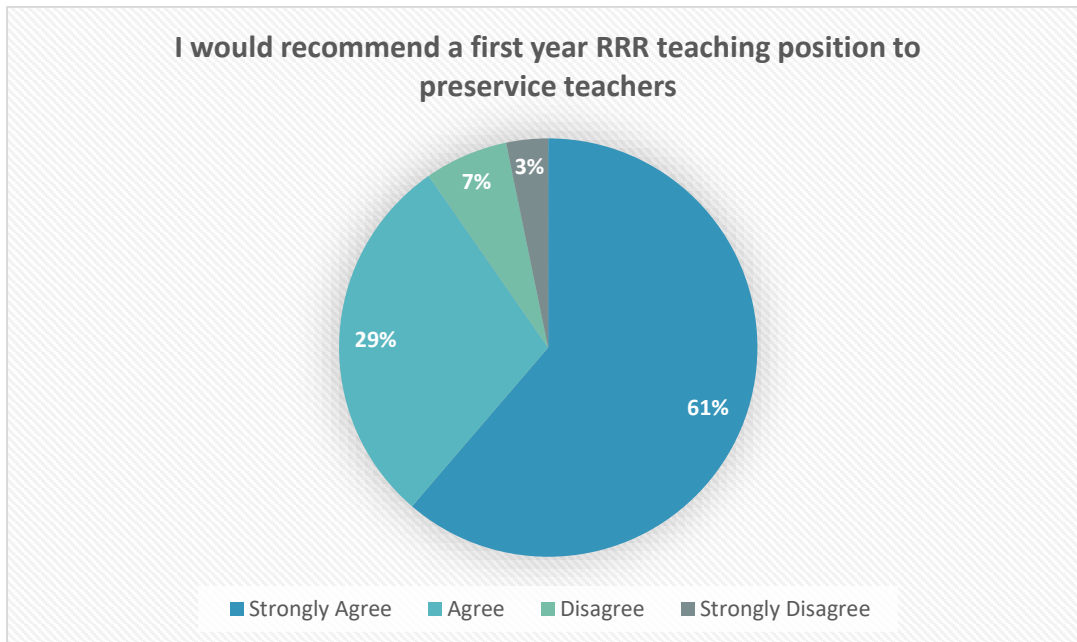
When participants need support, Table 4 shows they are most likely to turn to family members (93.76% total affirmative responses in the always and sometimes categories) and colleagues at school (93.75% affirmative). This highlights the importance of professional relationships and family support. Participants often seek support from housemates (70.97% total affirmative responses), showing the importance of living arrangements for early career teachers in RRR contexts. However, not all early career teachers are living with housemates (see Appendix B), so this should not be assumed. These data also reveal the importance of friendships for support in these contexts. These findings seem to reflect the importance of initiatives within RRR communities that address health and wellbeing of teachers, as identified in the literature (Beutel et al., 2011; Trinidad et al, 2014) and reinforce the importance of creating a supportive and welcoming social atmosphere.

Table 4: Sources of Support for Early Career RRR teachers

Survey item: When I need support, I turn to my…	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	N/A	Total
Colleagues at school	62.50%	31.25%	6.25%	0.00%	0.00%	32
University friends	22.58%	38.71%	19.35%	19.35%	0.00%	31
Social media	3.23%	48.39%	22.58%	22.58%	3.23%	31
Non-university friends	34.38%	46.88%	12.50%	6.25%	0.00%	32
Family	65.63%	28.13%	3.13%	3.13%	0.00%	32
Housemates	45.16%	25.81%	3.23%	0.00%	25.81%	31

Third-year teachers (n=14) are more likely to seek support from non-uni friends (85.7%) than their second-year counterparts (n=13, 69.2%). This may point to changes in friendships over time, but would need to be confirmed by further research. Young professionals (n=16) are more likely to

seek support from housemates (87.6%) than their mature-aged (first job out of uni) counterparts (n=13, 50%). However, 41.7% of mature-aged graduates report N/A (not applicable) for housemates (compared to 12.5% of young professionals), suggesting that housing arrangements differ according to stage of life.

Qualitative Findings

This section presents the findings from the qualitative survey items that investigated projected time for teaching in RRR locations, tips for surviving and thriving in RRR locations, lessons learnt, and metaphors and sayings used to describe RRR experiences.

Projected Time Teaching in RRR Locations

The survey item "How long do you plan on teaching in RRR locations?" was open-ended to capture the complexity of factors behind early career teacher intentions. Some participants gave a numeric response (summarised in the first part of Table 5 below) and others provided qualifying information about their intentions (presented in the second part of Table 5).

Table 5: How long do you plan on teaching in RRR locations? (n=32)

Indicated length of time	Number
2 years	3
3 years	5
4 years	8
5 years	4
> 5 years	4
Indefinitely	5
Unknown/unsure	1

Associated qualitative information

Length of the HECS payment (4 years).

We bought a house out here because we loved it so much, but teacher housing was small, so that was also a deciding factor.

The minimum I need to, but this may change to 5 years depending on if I can get a transfer.

Depends on where life takes me.

The next few years but only in regional centres.

I would like to stay in RRR but move closer to my parents.

I don't plan on leaving.

Approximately one-third of participants planned to stay in RRR locations for more than five years. The tone of these responses was positive in the main.

Top tips for Surviving and Thriving in RRR Communities

Two open-ended survey items asked early career teachers to identify their top tips for surviving and thriving in RRR communities. Surviving and thriving responses are tabled together below (Table 6) to show the strong themes of developing social and professional connections across both items.

Responses to the survival tips item revealed strong recommendations for building networks in RRR communities (15 participants), exploring the local area and connecting with community activities (11 participants), developing healthy habits and resilience (5 participants), having a positive mindset and attitude (3 participants), and developing an understanding of community dynamics (3 participants).

Responses to the thriving tips item similarly revealed strong recommendations for getting involved in the local community (10 participants), making friends (8 participants), saying 'yes' and getting outside your comfort zone (5 participants) and getting outside and exploring (3 participants).

Table 6: *Tips for Surviving and Thriving in RRR Locations*

Tips for Surviving		Tips for Thriving	
Codes	**Example data excerpts**	**Codes**	**Example data excerpts**
Building networks (professional and social) (n=15)	Relationships are everything, but they will take time. Have a support system outside of town/community. You will need someone to cry to or talk to that isn't in the town. Find other newish teachers and connect with them	Make friends (n=8)	You will miss home, and you will miss your friends, but by excluding yourself (not talking to other staff, not going to staff functions, not talking to them about your life), you make it harder on yourself. Make friends outside the school staff. When invited to anything social, just say yes!
Exploring the local area and connecting with community activities (n=11)	Accept invitations to explore with others. Get involved… find the best places to visit. Go country as much as possible, it keeps you grounded and sane.	Community involvement (n=10)	Go to the games. Play a sport socially. Watch the footy games, go out to dinner… participate/volunteer in local events See a movie with a friend… [go to] trivia nights Say hello to everyone! Join the P&C, participate in community fun runs, art classes, sports, and BBQs.
		Get outside and explore (n=3)	Get out and explore your area. Embrace the outdoors, but be prepared for the heat.
Positive mindset and attitude (n=3)	It's a mindset and lifestyle choice as much as it is a job. Be prepared to roll up your sleeves and lend a hand—even if it's outside your teaching areas.	Say "yes" and get out of your comfort zone (n=5)	Trying things that are out of your comfort zone. Making mistakes and learning from them! ' Saying yes to everything. Take on as many opportunities as possible.

Tips for Surviving		Tips for Thriving	
Codes	**Example data excerpts**	**Codes**	**Example data excerpts**
Healthy habits and resilience (n=5)	If you're not mentally stable, don't do it. Take a friend or pet with you (even in the first few weeks). Some of what [you] encounter is very confronting, and you need to talk about it. Don't be afraid to ask for help.		
Understanding community dynamics (n=3)	Understanding which students/families are connected is extremely beneficial. Don't get dragged into the community drama... Be an ear, don't comment or join in.		

There is a flow of logic across these tabulated findings of tips for surviving and thriving. That is, build professional and social networks to survive, but build friendships to thrive. Explore the local area and be involved in community activities to survive and thrive. Have a positive mindset and attitude to survive, but get out of your comfort zone to thrive. The qualitative finding regarding friendships in Table 6 adds meaning to quantitative data in Table 4 that shows the importance of friendships for support and the increased likelihood of third-year RRR teachers turning to friends for support compared to their second-year RRR counterparts. Together, these findings allude to the importance of giving time to develop friendships in RRR places. Notwithstanding, third-year RRR teachers also report higher ratings of social isolation (Appendix B), so the development of friendships cannot be assumed, nor are friendships guaranteed antidotes to negative experiences. The salient learning here is that friendships provide the necessary support.

Lessons Learnt About RRR Teaching:

When early career teachers were asked to identify their first major lesson learnt about RRR teaching, approximately one-third of teachers (n=10) mentioned lessons learned about students. Within these responses, teachers mentioned student backgrounds and lifestyles, learning needs, behaviours, and educational goals:

> *The students' perspective on life is quite different due to a different lifestyle and upbringing.*

> *Not every student is determined to go down a tertiary pathway.*

> *Students are not what we see on the Coast [in South-East Queensland]. We have very diverse students who need love and respect.*

The other major lesson learnt expressed in responses to this question was the need to build

relationships and make connections.

> *Build relationships before anything else. Connect before you correct.*

I know nothing… about farming and agriculture. Learn from your students… it helps build your relationships with them.

Other lessons early career teachers learnt that came forward in qualitative data were about finding and developing teaching resources (5 participants), teaching trauma-affected students in RRR contexts (3 participants), the need for differentiation (5 participants), and the need for support for teachers in these places (4 participants).

Metaphors and Sayings

Participants had the opportunity in the survey to describe their RRR experience using a metaphor. Some participants used metaphors, other opted to use sayings. Table 7 captures these responses.

Table 7: Metaphors and Sayings to Describe RRR Teaching Experiences

Metaphors	Sayings
A box of chocolates (2 mentions)	You get out of it as much as you put into it.
A roller coaster (2 mentions)	It is what it is!
A fast-food order: It doesn't feel very healthy, but it has moments of pure indulgence (student or staff successes).	All dreams can come true if we have the courage to pursue them.
Family. A home away from home.	Life is bigger on the inside.
It's a marathon, not a sprint!	Take every opportunity.
The Great Dividing Range: a collection of ups and downs.	Take one day at a time.
At first, it's like trying to stand in a hammock, then you realise you need to lie down.	
A teacher is a juggler.	
There is light at the end of the tunnel.	

There is a strong theme of *ups and downs* among the metaphors—juggling, roller coaster rides, the Great Dividing Range (mountain range), and trying to stand up on a hammock. There is also an evident theme in this item of taking what comes your way—like a box of chocolates, "*it is what it i*s," take one day at a time.

Across every qualitative survey item, early career teachers stressed the importance of building relationships (both professional and social) and connecting with the community (socially, culturally, and geographically). To further investigate the nuances of these findings, follow-up interviews were conducted with nine participants. However, the focus of this paper is on survey findings.

Discussion

In the main, survey results presented above demonstrate early career teachers' positive dispositions toward RRR positions and their cultural, locational, and professional experiences in these locations. This was surprising as previous studies have thoroughly outlined the challenges of attracting and retaining teachers in RRR locations (Hudson & Hudson, 2019; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; White, 2019), demonstrating the need for current teacher voice in these issues and confirming the value of critical ethnography as a methodology in this study. ., The majority of early-career teachers in this study recommended RRR positions to pre-service

teachers, although the challenges were significant. This critical ethnography shows that the benefits outweigh the challenges teachers face in RRR communities for early career teachers in this case. The outcomes were deemed worth it, even though there are 'ups and downs' of teaching in RRR contexts. Overall, the advice is to 'give it a go, but don't stand up in a hammock!' There is a need to extend this investigation to more experienced teachers, as Halsey (2018) indicates there is a lack of experienced teachers in RRR locations. The appraisal of benefits and challenges may differ to their early career counterparts.

Although three-quarters of participants indicated teaching in RRR contexts was emotionally taxing, there was still high positivity amongst respondents towards teaching in an RRR setting, with repeated recommendations to build strong relationships, explore the local area and get involved in community events. The negative sentiment amongst third-year RRR teachers, describing RRR teaching as socially isolating and emotionally taxing, ought to be noted and warrants further research. This finding aligns with the Downes and Roberts (2018) paper that outlines the challenges of teaching in RRR locations. Third-year RRR teachers also reported an increased likelihood of turning to friends for support than their less experienced counterparts, suggesting that the length of RRR service may be related to the establishment of friendships. Further investigation is needed to better understand this socio-cultural phenomenon.

What is apparent in the survey data is strong advice from early career RRR teachers for pre-service teachers regarding their preparedness in five areas: social (building networks and making friends), geographical (exploring the local area and getting involved in community), emotional (positive mindset and getting out of your comfort zone), personal (healthy habits and resilience), and cultural (understanding community). These five themes run throughout the data but were identified in the second round of thematic analysis when emergent themes were abstracted and tabled according in *surviving* and *thriving* categories to meet the intent of the study (Miles et al., 2020). There is a strong alignment between these five areas and Kelly and Fogarty's (2015) notion of rural consciousness and Downes and Roberts's (2018) description of understanding rurality. These five areas also present an opportunity for pre-service teachers to adopt a pre-determined approach to RRR placement and possible first teaching job. A pre-determined approach may help ground pre-service teachers who might be at risk of 'trying to stand in a hammock' and provide them with guidance for the 'roller coaster' experience of 'ups and downs' (borrowing from metaphors articulated in Table 7). Pre-determinations may help them 'juggle' professional and personal competing imperatives and adapt to a community rather than try to save it (Schulz, 2017). These five areas of preparedness are summarised as pre-determinations in Figure 3.

Figure 3: *Pre-determinations to Prepare Pre-service Teachers for RRR Teaching Locations*

Conclusions

The survey research in this study makes a contribution toward a better understanding of the experiences of early career teachers in RRR locations and need for pre-determinations (Figure 3) for pre-service teachers when preparing for RRR teaching positions.

There is an evident opportunity to leverage the experiences of early career teachers in RRR locations to furnish pre-service teachers with information to help them prepare and pre-determine their approaches to RRR placements and appointments. Systems administrators, education leaders and Initial Teacher Education providers must not assume that pre-service teachers have the resources to thrive in difficult-to-staff locations like RRR contexts without holistic support. Although financial and professional incentives are an attractant to RRR locations (Queensland Government, 2022), incentives were not mentioned in the data.

Tensions between positive and negative experiences are salient in the data, and the extent of these experiences will be unique for everyone. There are no evident trade-offs or easy solutions in the data; for example, one thing does not fix another. What data do reveal are paradoxes— such as increased support from friends while feeling increasingly emotionally taxed. We cannot view RRR experiences in transactional terms alone, as described at the beginning of this paper. We must view them in terms of personal growth and development (surviving and thriving), with the understanding that paradoxical tensions exist in personal experiences. That is, although a

RRR location may be challenging and emotionally taxing, it is also professionally developing and rewarding, and the professional, social, cultural and personal yield has value.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Do you give your consent to participate in research? (Insert information from RPIS here.)
Yes/No

How long have you been teaching in a RRR position? ___ years ___ months

Years of teaching experience:
First-year
Second year
Third year
Teaching context:
Primary
Secondary
Both (e.g. specialist teachers)

How would you describe your work experience and career stage:
I'm a young professional, and this is my first job out of university
This is my first job out of university, and I was a mature aged student
I'm a career changer, I've had other professional jobs (that required a university
degree) before

What is your highest degree?
Bachelor
Master of Teaching
Master of Education
Doctorate

Are you working in a government or non-government school?
Government
Non-government

How long do you plan on teaching in RRR locations?
 [written response]

What is your top survival tip for living in a RRR community?
[written response]

More than just surviving, what is your number one tip for *thriving* in a RRR community?
[written response]

What was the first major lesson you learnt about RRR teaching?
[written response]

What other lessons have you since learned about RRR teaching?
[written response]

Rating scale survey items:

Teaching in a RRR context is:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
Rewarding					
Challenging					
Socially isolating					
Emotionally taxing					
Culturally enriching					
Developing me as a professional					
I would recommend a first year RRR teaching position to pre-service teachers					
When I need support, I turn to my:					
Colleagues at school					
Uni friends					
Social media					
Non-uni friends					
Family					
Housemates					

Upload a photo (or two or three) that captures your RRR experience. Please ensure the photograph does not identify your school or students. It may be a photo of your professional work, your housing, your geographic location, or significant artefacts—whatever you think encapsulates your RRR teaching experience.
[upload portal]

Explain the significance of your uploaded photographs.
[long response]

Is there a metaphor you might use to describe your RRR work and life?
[long response]

We are looking for 20 willing participants who are keen to help prepare University of the Sunshine Coast pre-service teachers for RRR teaching. Would you like to participate in a 30 minute interview via Zoom to further unpack your RRR teaching experiences?
Yes/No
If yes, please provide your email address and we will be in touch. 😊

Appendix B: Cross-tabulated Analyses

		How would you describe your geographical location?			Years of teaching experience		How would you describe your work experience and career stage:	
		REMOTE. Ten (10) or more hours' drive from the Qld coast between Brisbane and Cooktown, or one (1) or more hours' drive north or northwest of Cooktown.	REGIONAL. Between one (1) and nine (9) hours' drive from Brisbane.	RURAL. A regional or remote area where agricultural, pastoral or mining industries are dominant.	Second year	Third year	Young professional and this is my first job out of university	Mature aged, first job out of university
	Total Count (Answering)	17.0	13.0	17.0	13.0	14.0	16.0	13.0
Teaching in RRR contexts is...								
Rewarding	Strongly Agree	66.7%	58.8%	59.1%	91.7%	42.9%	62.5%	66.7%
	Agree	33.3%	41.2%	36.4%	8.3%	50.0%	37.5%	25.0%
	Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%	8.3%
	Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Challenging	Strongly Agree	71.4%	72.2%	65.2%	69.2%	64.3%	68.8%	69.2%
	Agree	25.0%	27.8%	34.8%	30.8%	28.6%	31.3%	23.1%
	Disagree	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%	7.7%
	Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Socially isolating	Strongly Agree	17.9%	17.6%	22.7%	0.0%	42.9%	20.0%	15.4%
	Agree	21.4%	23.5%	22.7%	27.3%	14.3%	20.0%	38.5%
	Disagree	50.0%	52.9%	45.5%	54.5%	42.9%	53.3%	30.8%
	Strongly Disagree	10.7%	5.9%	9.1%	18.2%	0.0%	6.7%	15.4%
Emotionally taxing	Strongly Agree	32.1%	33.3%	39.1%	46.2%	35.7%	37.5%	38.5%
	Agree	42.9%	50.0%	39.1%	23.1%	42.9%	31.3%	46.2%
	Disagree	25.0%	16.7%	17.4%	23.1%	21.4%	25.0%	15.4%
	Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	4.3%	7.7%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%

			How would you describe your geographical location?			Years of teaching experience		How would you describe your work experience and career stage:	
			REMOTE. Ten (10) or more hours' drive from the Qld coast between Brisbane and Cooktown, or one (1) or more hours' drive north or northwest of Cooktown.	REGIONAL. Between one (1) and nine (9) hours' drive from Brisbane.	RURAL. A regional or remote area where agricultural, pastoral or mining industries are dominant.	Second year	Third year	Young professional and this is my first job out of university	Mature aged, first job out of university
	Culturally enriching	Strongly Agree	63.0%	58.8%	54.5%	61.5%	53.8%	53.3%	69.2%
		Agree	33.3%	29.4%	36.4%	30.8%	38.5%	46.7%	15.4%
		Disagree	3.7%	11.8%	9.1%	7.7%	7.7%	0.0%	15.4%
		Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Developing me as a professional	Strongly Agree	74.1%	70.6%	68.2%	100.0%	50.0%	75.0%	75.0%
		Agree	25.9%	29.4%	27.3%	0.0%	42.9%	25.0%	16.7%
		Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%	8.3%
		Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
I would recommend a first year RRR teaching position to pre-service teachers	Total Count (Answering)					13.0	13.0	15.0	13.0
		Strongly Agree	63.0%	58.8%	63.6%	76.9%	53.8%	60.0%	53.8%
		Agree	25.9%	23.5%	18.2%	15.4%	30.8%	33.3%	23.1%
		Disagree	11.1%	17.6%	13.6%	7.7%	7.7%	6.7%	15.4%
		Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	0.0%	7.7%	0.0%	7.7%
When I need support, I turn to my:	Total Count (Answering)					13.0	14.0	16.0	13.0
	Colleagues at school	Always	57.1%	55.6%	56.5%	69.2%	50.0%	75.0%	46.2%
		Sometimes	35.7%	38.9%	39.1%	30.8%	35.7%	18.8%	46.2%
		Rarely	7.1%	5.6%	4.3%	0.0%	14.3%	6.3%	7.7%
		Never	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
		N/A	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

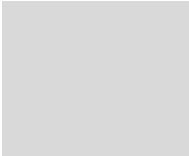|		How would you describe your geographical location?			Years of teaching experience		How would you describe your work experience and career stage:	
		REMOTE. Ten (10) or more hours' drive from the Qld coast between Brisbane and Cooktown, or one (1) or more hours' drive north or northwest of Cooktown.	REGIONAL. Between one (1) and nine (9) hours' drive from Brisbane.	RURAL. A regional or remote area where agricultural, pastoral or mining industries are dominant.	Second year	Third year	Young professional and this is my first job out of university	Mature aged, first job out of university
Uni friends	Always	18.5%	16.7%	18.2%	30.8%	23.1%	31.3%	8.3%
	Sometimes	40.7%	38.9%	40.9%	23.1%	38.5%	31.3%	41.7%
	Rarely	22.2%	22.2%	22.7%	30.8%	7.7%	18.8%	25.0%
	Never	18.5%	22.2%	18.2%	15.4%	30.8%	18.8%	25.0%
	N/A	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Social media	Always	3.7%	5.6%	4.5%	0.0%	7.7%	6.3%	0.0%
	Sometimes	44.4%	55.6%	59.1%	53.8%	38.5%	62.5%	33.3%
	Rarely	25.9%	22.2%	22.7%	30.8%	23.1%	12.5%	41.7%
	Never	22.2%	16.7%	9.1%	15.4%	23.1%	12.5%	25.0%
	N/A	3.7%	0.0%	4.5%	0.0%	7.7%	6.3%	0.0%
Non-uni friends	Always	28.6%	33.3%	26.1%	15.4%	35.7%	25.0%	38.5%
	Sometimes	42.9%	33.3%	47.8%	53.8%	50.0%	50.0%	38.5%
	Rarely	21.4%	22.2%	17.4%	15.4%	14.3%	18.8%	15.4%
	Never	7.1%	11.1%	8.7%	15.4%	0.0%	6.3%	7.7%
	N/A	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Family	Always	57.1%	44.4%	56.5%	53.8%	64.3%	56.3%	76.9%
	Sometimes	35.7%	44.4%	34.8%	30.8%	35.7%	37.5%	15.4%
	Rarely	3.6%	5.6%	4.3%	7.7%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%
	Never	3.6%	5.6%	4.3%	7.7%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%
	N/A	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Housemates	Always	37.0%	27.8%	40.9%	61.5%	30.8%	43.8%	50.0%

		How would you describe your geographical location?			Years of teaching experience		How would you describe your work experience and career stage:	
		REMOTE. Ten (10) or more hours' drive from the Qld coast between Brisbane and Cooktown, or one (1) or more hours' drive north or northwest of Cooktown.	REGIONAL. Between one (1) and nine (9) hours' drive from Brisbane.	RURAL. A regional or remote area where agricultural, pastoral or mining industries are dominant.	Second year	Third year	Young professional and this is my first job out of university	Mature aged, first job out of university
	Sometimes	29.6%	27.8%	27.3%	15.4%	46.2%	43.8%	0.0%
	Rarely	3.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	0.0%	8.3%
	Never	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	N/A	29.6%	44.4%	31.8%	23.1%	15.4%	12.5%	41.7%