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Beyond Window Shopping: Using Stakeholder Narratives to Inform the Design and Impact of Australian Non-Metropolitan Teacher Placements

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Abstract

Despite decades of policies and interventions, challenges in sustaining a consistent pipeline of teachers to meet the needs of Australian non-metropolitan areas remain unresolved. Legislative frameworks and policies emphasise that initial teacher education providers take steps to better prepare preservice teachers for these diverse contexts. In response, government-funded alliances have been established between universities and clusters of regional schools, aiming to deliver supported professional experience placements in such settings. To inform the future design of these initiatives, this study examines one university-school partnership situated in a south-eastern Australia locality, classified as 'regional'.

Using a figured worlds methodology, the study draws on the collective narratives of multiple stakeholders including teacher educators, mentor teachers, a principal, and preservice teachers. Findings emphasise that to move beyond "*window shopping*" experiences, stakeholder agency must be central to any placement design. While funding and policy discussions emphasise investment in teacher education, the real challenge lies in aligning these efforts with the lived experiences of educators and communities in non-metropolitan areas. This study suggests that for long term impact, a more sustainable and community-driven approach is needed to address the realities of preparing teachers for these contexts.

Key words: *non-metropolitan, placement design, initial teacher education, preservice teachers, university-school partnership, stakeholder agency*

Introduction

Australia (the context for this study) has long recognised the disparities in educational outcomes between students in rural, regional, and remote areas, collectively and more inclusively referred to as 'non-metropolitan' throughout this paper, and their metropolitan counterparts. Systemic inequities first highlighted in the *1999 HREOC Bush Talks Report* (Stokes et al., 1999) continue to affect these communities. These include limited access to quality education, healthcare, social services, and economic opportunities and challenges in sustaining a consistent pipeline of teachers to meet the staffing needs (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Halsey, 2023; Stokes et

al., 1999). Reports reiterate long held concerns surrounding teacher shortages, quality, attraction, and retention (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Halsey, 2018).

The *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey, 2018) called for more targeted approaches in initial teacher education. Specifically, advocating for the integration of non-metropolitan-specific knowledge into initial teacher education programs through collaboration with key stakeholders to ensure relevance and responsiveness to local contexts. These recommendations align with broader initiatives aimed at strengthening partnerships between initial teacher education providers and schools, helping to bridge the persistent theory-practice divide (Paul et al., 2021; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014). However, despite continual calls for reform, the Strong Beginnings Report (Paul et al., 2023) highlights that initial teacher education (ITE) graduates remain inadequately prepared to teach in settings beyond metropolitan areas.

Recognising that these non-metropolitan schools and communities are not homogeneous, and vary in size, remoteness, teaching and learning environments, and community factors, Halsey (2023) recommends that more appropriate funding to ensure placement opportunities in these contexts are supported. The 2018 report also recommends offering incentives to attract graduates to RRR areas (the report's preferred terminology). In response, state governments have introduced various funding initiatives. For example, the Victorian Government allocated $2.6 million in 2022/2023 to support the *Teach Rural Pilot Program* (Victorian State Government, 2023), which aimed to address barriers such as isolation, relocation and accommodation costs that deter preservice teachers from undertaking placements in rural settings (Victorian State Government, 2023). Two key Victorian partnership programs, the *Teaching Academies of Professional Practice* (2014-2023) and *Placement Plus* (2024-2025), were developed to enhance preservice teachers' placements across metropolitan areas (Victorian State Government, 2023) and more recently in a range of rural, regional and urban growth corridors (Australian Government, n.d.). These funded initiatives primarily aim to provide tailored wraparound support, such as professional learning opportunities for mentor teachers, and creating opportunities to strengthen connections between preservice teachers and school communities (Victorian State Government, 2023).

This research investigates the co-design and implementation of a government funded initial teacher education-school partnership program, implemented by the initial teacher education provider in conjunction with four primary schools located in a regional city of Victoria referred to using the pseudonym 'Kipleton' throughout this paper. Co-design was chosen as an effective tool to support partnership design by drawing on academic rigor and practical insights (Fitzgerald et al., 2025). Using Holland et al.'s (1998) concept of figured worlds, this study considers the perspectives of teacher educators, mentor teachers, a school principal, and preservice teachers to address the following research question: How can the collective narratives of stakeholders from one Australian non-metropolitan placement inform approaches to placement design in similar settings?

Aligned with the broader goal of encouraging preservice teachers to pursue careers in non-metropolitan educational settings, this study offers insights into the design and implementation of a regional placement from the perspective of all stakeholders. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to improve the long-term sustainability of teacher supply, including graduate teachers, in underserved regions.

Literature Review

It is important to be explicit about the nomenclature used to understand terms such as 'regional', 'rural' and 'remote' in Australia. The country spans over 7.6 million square kilometres and has a population of over 27 million people, with the majority living along the coast in major urban areas

(e.g., Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth). In examining this spread of population, the *Australian Statistical Geography Standard* (ASGS) defines five remoteness categories based on access to services: major cities, inner regional areas, outer regional areas, remote areas, and very remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). These categories are determined using the *Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia Plus* (ARIA+), which calculates road distances to service centres (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

While these categories offer an objective, geographical-oriented classification, the term 'rural' (notably missing from the scale) is often used broadly to describe all non-metropolitan areas (Roberts & Fuqua, 2021). Literature frequently combines rural, regional, and remote into a single category (Murphy et al., 2024). Although the location for this study is technically categorised as 'inner regional', the term 'non-metropolitan' and regional will be used interchangeably throughout this paper to reflect contemporary academic usage. Non-metropolitan terminology we argue privileges places that are often invisible in literature that by default focuses on 'the other'. The term 'rural' is also retained in some instances, as it is a commonly used descriptor by policymakers and practitioners to colloquially refer to these settings, despite its broader and often ambiguous meaning. We acknowledge that all places are unique and that any preparation for a school community should focus on the affordances of that place where students and their families live.

Government policies, reviews, and recommendations provide a persuasive case for prioritising teacher education for non-metropolitan places, to address the ongoing workforce shortages and to ensure equitable access to quality education for all Australian students (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Halsey, 2018; Halsey, 2023; Stokes et al., 1999). These reforms and strategies aim to attract high-quality candidates to teaching roles in regional and remote communities by equipping them with the necessary skills and support to thrive in such environments.

School–university partnerships for preservice teacher placements have gained global prominence for delivering high-quality placement experience (Green et al., 2019; O'Grady, 2017). These partnerships are often conceptualised as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) where universities, schools, and teachers collaborate to prepare preservice teachers for the realities of contemporary classrooms.

In Australia, various government-funded university-school alliances have been developed to strengthen placement experiences. These include, but are not limited to, New South Wales's *Co-design Hub* programs (NSW Government, 2013); Queensland's *Centres of Excellence* (White et al., 2018) and *Teacher Enhancement Centres* (Thiele et al., 2024); Northern Territory *Teaching Schools Program* (Scott et al.2023); and in Victoria, initiatives such as the *Teaching Academies of Professional Practice* and *Placement Plus*, which are aim to enhance the quality of preservice teachers' placements across metropolitan, regional and growth corridor schools (Victorian State Government, 2023).

Despite their potential, these partnerships can be fragile, as their sustainability depends on ongoing funding, which is vulnerable to budgetary shifts and political change (Martin & Mulvihill, 2020). Establishing effective partnerships goes beyond the initial teacher education provider securing government grants. Once the funding is awarded, the responsibility for design and implementation primarily falls on the initial teacher education provider. This often leads to a complex interweaving of institutional priorities, policy goals and community needs (Amey & Eddy, 2023).

While the literature emphasises the importance of preparing teachers for the distinctive cultural, social, and professional contexts of non-metropolitan schools (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024), it also reveals the substantial challenges faced in these settings. Recent studies provide a deeper understanding of the potential benefits and long-term impact of well-supported placements outside metropolitan areas. Drawing on this body of work, the following sections explore three

interrelated themes: metro-centric assumptions embedded in initial teacher education, the development of a sense of place and space, and the need to critically re-examine prevailing narratives associated with teaching in rural and regional contexts.

Metro-centric Assumptions in Initial Teacher Education

Despite research identifying the need for specialised teacher preparation to accommodate diverse educational contexts beyond major cities (Downes & Roberts, 2018), significant gaps remain. The Australian Professional Standards for Teaching emphasise the importance of teachers understanding students and their contexts (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017), but these standards predominantly reflect the needs and characteristics of metropolitan schools (Ledger et al., 2021). This one-size-fits-all approach, supported by standardised policies and reforms, overlooks the uniqueness of regional, rural and remote schools and communities, including the need to understand 'rurality', community dynamics, and adapt curriculum resources to these specific contexts (Downes & Roberts, 2018). Standardisation therefore perpetuates a metro normative bias leaving graduate teachers working in non-metropolitan areas often feeling unprepared, as the general curriculum does not meet their specific needs or those of their students (Roberts et al., 2024). Addressing this metro normative bias requires an awareness of the localised cultural and social dynamics (Halsey, 2023; Roberts et al, 2024).

One suggested solution is the adoption of place-conscious pedagogy, where initial teacher education providers tailor curriculum practices to align with the needs of rural communities (White & Reid, 2008; White, 2019). Developing 'rural consciousness' (Willis & Louth, 2024) involves preparing preservice teachers to adapt to varied settings by promoting the necessary attitudes, values, and adaptability across cultural, geographical, and professional domains (Downes & Roberts, 2018). It recognises that effective teaching is always contextualised, grounded in the teacher's responsiveness to their learners and their understanding of place (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024).

Developing a Sense of Space and Place

Non-metropolitan-based placement opportunities provide much-needed immersive experiences (Willis & Louth, 2024) to help preservice teachers understand the unique needs of students and communities in these contexts (Murphy et al., 2024). A 'one size fits all' approach to professional development ignores the situatedness of teaching (Mayer, 2021) leading to under-theorisation of non-metropolitan education and potentially imposing identity deficits on them (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024). Instead, research suggests that preservice teachers planning to work in rural contexts need to be both 'classroom ready' and 'community ready' (White & Kline, 2012). Developing a sense of space and place is important for teachers to integrate into the social and cultural fabric of non-metropolitan communities (Murphy et al, 2024) and cannot be defined by standards that ignore the local setting (Henderson & Mandalawi, 2024). Macdonald et al. (2025) argue that superficial understanding of space and place, akin to a tourist, fails to create meaningful connections with the community. Such connections are critical for understanding the intersection between rural social space, pedagogy, and teacher identity (Kline et al., 2014).

These rural placements are often optional, brief, and superficial; providing limited exposure to rural community life (Murphy et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2024). In contrast holistic policy approaches, collaborative curriculum reforms, and cohort-based placements can offer more robust preparation (Halsey, 2018). Creating inclusive school community environments, and opportunities for engagement with Indigenous and migrant populations, can further enhance readiness for teaching in non-metropolitan contexts (Murphy et al., 2024).

Re-examining Prevailing Rural Narratives

Many government policies and incentives designed to address hard-to-staff non-metropolitan locations are often framed through a deficit-based narrative, portraying these communities as inherently disadvantaged (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024; White, 2019). Such perspectives frequently overlook the strengths of these communities, including their strong social support systems and unique opportunities for personal and professional growth (Yarrow et al., 1999). Additionally, the assumption that all non-metropolitan communities are homogenous fails to recognise the significant diversity that exists across different geographical contexts (Yarrow et al., 1999). Many of the perceived disadvantages are shaped by metrocentric perspectives, which overlook the inherent capabilities and resources of local education systems, resulting in a mismatch between preservice teachers' expectations and the realities of working in these settings (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018). Immersive placement experiences are therefore important for challenging these preconceived notions to create a more nuanced understanding of the strengths and opportunities available in non-metropolitan education (Murphy et al., 2024).

Research Context

This placement program was offered to third-year preservice teachers enrolled in a four-year Bachelor of Education university degree through a metropolitan based initial teacher education provider. The placement site for this study is located within a non-metropolitan area, and was advertised as 'a rural teaching experience.' The program was presented an opt-in opportunity for preservice teachers to undertake placement beyond their metropolitan context. The program was co-designed to provide a supportive and immersive placement experience, with the broader goal of inspiring preservice teachers to consider pursuing teaching opportunities in non-metropolitan locations after graduation. The initial teacher education provider applied for, and was successful in receiving government funding to provide wraparound supports for the placement. This funding was critical for covering the costs associated with the range of supports listed in Table 1, which were co-designed situationally for this partnership to enhance the placement experience.

Table 1: ***Designed Program Supports***

Before Placement	During Placement
Teacher educators networked with district and school leaders to discuss possibilities. This included meetings, dinners and shared planning.	Preservice teachers participated in a day-long Aboriginal cultural experience led by a local Elder.
Teacher educators hosted a mentor teacher professional development session. This included sharing pre-recorded videos of the preservice teachers introducing themselves and explaining their goals for the experience. The session also focused on mentoring conversations, gradual release, observations and feedback.	Preservice teachers were accommodated in shared cabins at the same location. Accommodation was provided by the university for the duration, including two days prior to the placement and weekends.
Teacher educators held a series of informal meetings with preservice teachers to answer questions, share information about Kipleton and to discuss possibilities.	Preservice teachers spent a day of their placement visiting a number of local schools in the community and surrounding areas.
Teacher educators visited the community a number of times to select accommodation, visit schools and organise an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Education experience.	Preservice teachers participated in wider school community events, including social staff gatherings, athletics carnivals etc. Teacher educators provided pastoral support to preservice teachers by hosting two dinners, visiting classrooms and schools.

The initial teacher education provider partnered with four schools in Kipleton, a regional community with a district wide population of around 27,000, to provide 10 preservice teachers with a three-week placement. These preservice teachers worked alongside experienced classroom teachers who served as mentors. The provider applied for funding from the relevant government body, however, the timeline from notification of funding to implementation was very tight. This timeline created some challenges in logistics for the provider taking responsibility for organising and using government funding to provide shared accommodation and an Indigenous cultural heritage experience led by the local elders. Ideally housing should be a community-based initiative to enable matching of needs to resources.

Theoretical Lens

The concept of *figured worlds*, introduced by Holland et al. (1998), refers to socially constructed realms in which individuals engage in culturally meaningful activities, interact with others, and negotiate their identities within specific contexts. These worlds are dynamically shaped through shared practices, values, and discourses (Urrieta, 2007). Within and across these worlds, identities are performed and negotiated in relation to the expectations and norms that govern participation. As individuals move between figured worlds, they draw upon cultural resources, navigate shifting power dynamics, and leverage their lived experiences to exercise agency and reconfigure their sense of self (Wiggins & Monobe, 2017).

This research applies figured worlds to examine a placement partnership in a regional location from the perspectives of all key stakeholders including, preservice teachers, teacher educators, school-based mentor teachers, and a school principal. This non-metropolitan placement partnership is viewed as a dynamic figured world where participants negotiate roles, develop identities, and interpret their experiences through shared practices, values, and narratives specific to teaching in this context. Within this figured world stakeholders bring distinct understandings and expectations that influence, and are influenced by, the cultural norms and discourses of non-metropolitan education. By analysing how this figured world operates, the research considers how identities, power relations, and agency are negotiated among stakeholders.

Method and Study Design

This study uses narrative inquiry as its methodological approach to explore the social, cultural, and identity-related processes within a regional placement partnership (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). By examining the perspectives of preservice teachers, teacher educators, and school staff, the research investigates how regional partnerships operate as socially constructed systems of meaning and practice. Narrative inquiry allows for a nuanced understanding of non-metropolitan education by focusing on collective stories and how those stories are shaped by relationships, contexts, and broader social and historical factors (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Narrative inquiry works in synergy with figured worlds by recognising that knowledge is storied and shaped by the shared narratives people construct from their experiences. This approach emphasises the importance of understanding both individual and collective experiences within the broader framework of social systems and structures. By capturing the voices of those most affected by education partnerships, the study offers valuable insights into how identities are negotiated, meaning is constructed, and power relations manifest within socio-cultural and historical contexts.

Participants and Data Collection

Participants in the study were purposely selected based on their involvement in the Kipleton placement during 2023. Ethics approval was granted by both University's human research ethics

committee (number 25567) and the state-based governmental Education Department to conduct surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. To address power dynamics with preservice teachers and ensure mentors and teacher educators felt comfortable critically assessing the program design, an independent research assistant was employed to conduct the interviews and focus group discussions and actively contribute to the data analysis.

Participants included the third-year preservice teachers, along with their mentor teachers, a principal and teacher educators who led this regional placement were invited to participate. A detailed summary is provided in Table 2 of the people who agreed to participate, their role, and data collection method.

Table 2: ***Participants' Roles, Pseudonyms, and Data Collection Methods***

Participants Role	**Number of Participants**	**Participants Pseudonym**	**Data Collection Method**
Preservice Teachers An education student completing a rural school-based placement. The preservice teachers progressively took on teaching responsibilities, including planning, instruction, and assessment, while developing professional skills under supervision.	4	Jane, Joel, Noel, Tarnia	Semi structured interviews
Mentor Teachers An experienced classroom teacher who guided and supported the preservice teachers' development. They modelled practice, provided feedback, and assessed the preservice teachers' performance against professional standards.	6	Toni, Adrian, Michelle Alex, Sam, Jamie	Focus group discussions
School Principal Oversaw the placement context across the four schools, promoted a supportive school environment, and contributed to orientation, school-wide understanding, and professional expectations.	1	Kim	Focus group discussions
Teacher Educators University academics who helped plan the placement structure, delivered pre-placement workshops for preservice teachers and mentors, and visited schools to offer support during the placement.	3	Kel, Sally, Pam	Online Survey

The interview and discussion questions were carefully designed to explore participants lived experiences, their connection to country and community, and their overall placement experience. These included questions such as: *Were there any similarities or differences that you saw in this cohort model to a placement that was scheduled in a different way?* and *Do you think that there could have been anything that was done to ensure that the preservice teachers were more connected to the community outside?*

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by the theoretical lens of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), which enabled exploration of how participants' identities were shaped within the cultural, institutional, and relational contexts of the Kipleton rural placement. The rural school site was conceptualised as a figured world where narratives of teaching, community, and place were constructed and negotiated.

To centre participants' lived experiences, Clandinin and Connelly's (2004) narrative inquiry was used to analyse data sources, interviews, focus groups, and survey responses as storied constructions rather than isolated themes. This approach highlighted the temporality, sociality, and contextuality of participants' narratives.

The analysis proceeded in phases. First, an independent research assistant conducted open, inductive coding of one full transcript. The researchers then independently coded the same transcript, collaboratively refining a shared coding framework to enhance inter-rater reliability. This framework was applied across the dataset to identify recurring narrative threads and interpretive tensions, such as collaboration and relationship, program design, and identity within institutional constraints.

A narrative coding approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) was then systematically applied to trace how experiences were shaped by temporal moments (e.g., arrival, classroom engagement, reflection), relational dynamics (e.g., mentor-mentee, university-school partnerships), and broader contextual influences (e.g., metro-normative assumptions, cultural immersion). Through iterative readings, collaborative interpretation, and narrative synthesis, three overarching themes were developed:

1. From Metro-normative to Place-conscious Figured Worlds
2. The 'Window Shopping' Experience
3. Intention versus Impact: Reproducing Hierarchical Figured Worlds

Findings

The following section presents the three narratives constructed from the data sets that we collected, offering insights into how participants made sense of their lived experiences. Developed through a narrative inquiry approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), these stories reflect the complexities and perspectives of the participants.

Teacher Educator Narrative

Kel, a teacher educator, explained that the placement program in Kipleton was built on principles of co-design and collaboration with local schools. "*From the outset, we envisioned a partnership where the university and local schools could work together to shape a meaningful placement experience*." Informal gatherings, such as dinners and breakfasts with school principals, were organised to incorporate the schools' input into the program's design. Sally, a member of the program design team quickly learned that "*Country people work with people, and not with emails*." A pre-placement networking approach was seen as important to the teams' efforts to build relationships and create a collaborative co-design placement model. Pam, another contributing academic, emphasised that the program not only aimed to build strong connections with the four local schools but also sought to establish meaningful relationships with Indigenous leaders, recognising these partnerships as essential to the program's success.

Collaboration was strengthened through both informal meetings and a dedicated mentor workshop. These events brought together university staff, school leaders, mentor teachers, and preservice teachers. A 'working with' approach was emphasized throughout the process, replacing the traditional 'doing to' model often experienced with placement design.

Pre-placement workshops played a key role in preparing mentor teachers and preservice teachers. Sessions for preservice teachers were held at the university and were offered as an open forum for sharing and planning. The preservice teachers' sessions were designed to build relationships among preservice teachers, familiarise them with the Kipleton area and placement expectations, and address their questions or concerns.

To build relationships with key teacher educators and create a supportive mentoring environment a workshop for mentors from all four schools was hosted at Kipleton Primary School. This workshop allowed for educator introductions, to provide an overview of the Bachelor of Education program, clarifying preservice teachers' previous placement experiences and introducing evidence-based mentoring strategies to support professional conversations. Additionally, to start a mentor-mentee connection, pre-recorded introductory videos created by the preservice teachers were shared during the workshop. These videos provided mentors with insights into the preservice teachers' backgrounds and their expectations for this placement experience.

The program design also prioritised building meaningful connections between preservice teachers and the local Indigenous community, which was addressed through an 'On Country' cultural awareness workshop. Pam explained the workshop offered valuable opportunities for preservice teachers to engage with diverse perspectives and reflect on cultural and historical contexts relevant to their future teaching roles.

Mentor Teachers and Principal Narratives

Toni, Adrian, and Michelle, mentor teachers in the Kipleton program, valued the flexibility of the program design which allowed them to tailor the placement to meet the individual needs of their preservice teachers. They employed a variety of mentoring strategies including regular check-ins, feedback sessions, and opportunities for the preservice teachers to observe experienced teachers. Alex, Sam, and Jamie, also mentor teachers in the program, emphasised their focus of creating opportunities for preservice teachers to build strong relationships with their students, as student well-being was a central tenant in each of their schools. Principal Kim, observed how the preservice teachers' built student connections and immersed "*themselves in the country [school] experience*". Examples of this included one preservice teacher creating a booklet about life in Kipleton, while another organised a lunch time card swap meet for students, using cards donated by family members.

Mentors identified a notable discrepancy between the preservice teachers' expectations and the realities of this placement. They questioned whether the program's 'rural' branding and initial framing by the initial teacher education provider had set preservice teachers' up for a specific type of 'non-metropolitan' experience. While the university colloquially classified Kipleton as a 'rural' placement, mentors perceived it as more urbanised and they found themselves managing the expectations of preservice teachers. Adrian suggested the preservice teachers had anticipated a "*small hick town out in the sticks*", with "*limited amenities*". Toni humorously explained that Kipleton has choices of shops and restaurants. This mismatch prompted mentors to suggest even better preparation for their context. This finding reveals an even more nuanced understanding of non-metropolitan places and while the town is regional and many of the preservice teachers travelled three hours from the city to attend the placement, the teachers perceived their place to be just like a city.

Although the program encouraged preservice teachers to engage in local activities and events, mentors believed this aspect was not fully realised within the limited timeframe of the placement. As one mentor noted "*you might get an initial feel, but digging deeper takes longer.*" The short three-week duration of the placement was identified as a challenge, particularly in terms of lesson planning and adapting to the local environment. To provide a more realistic experience mentors recommended that future placements be longer or be structured as a series

of shorter placements spread across multiple years, emphasising that wider community connections take time to develop and cannot be artificially created. They suggested that rather than organising community events, the program should focus on encouraging preservice teachers to take the initiative in engaging and shaping their own experiences in Kipleton. For mentors their priority was integrating preservice teachers into classroom teaching and their broader school communities. They questioned the value of preservice teachers taking a day out of their busy classroom schedules to visit surrounding smaller schools, given the short timeframe and the need to focus on their placement responsibilities. This opportunity was however highly valued by preservice teachers and gave them a richer understanding of the range of school settings and communities in non-metropolitan areas.

Mentors enjoyed the overall mentoring training as part of the program. Alex and Jamie found the training beneficial, particularly the alternative mentoring observation mapping technique. In contrast, Michelle and Adrian felt the technique was impractical and unnecessary. One suggested mentor recommendation was for a designated university liaison person to provide localised, timely support during placements. They noted that the purpose of the school visits by the teacher educators was not as clear to them and a more defined role for the liaison would better support the placement. Again, these differences in priorities and needs highlight some of the challenges of diverse stakeholder engagement.

Practical barriers to attracting teachers to Kipleton were also highlighted during the discussions. Toni noted the scarcity and high cost of rentals as a significant issue, while Adrian suggested a need for the government to invest in more accessible teacher accommodation options, similar to those used by the health sector in Kipleton. He acknowledged that while financial incentives can help attract teachers to Kipleton, they are not a panacea. "*You can throw as many millions as you want, unless you're actually preparing these graduates for what they are coming into, we're going to just keep losing them.*" Despite these concerns, the mentors believed that strong guidance from experienced mentors, combined with efforts to promote a sense of belonging with the broader community, would play a critical role in retaining teachers.

Preservice Teachers' Narratives

Preservice teachers positively reflected on their experiences of forming meaningful connections within their school communities and with each other during their placements in Kipleton. Jane, Joel, Noel, and Tarnia attributed this ease to living and socialising together, smaller school sizes, close-knit staff, and the general welcoming atmosphere of the town. Jane described the close-knit nature of the regional city, noting, "*They love just getting to know people, they love having a chat*." The preservice teachers consistently highlighted the warmth and inclusive feel of the school environments. Joel observed that by the end of the placement, all staff, including the principal, "*knew me by name*," a contrast to his previous metropolitan placements. Informal teacher gatherings, such as shared meals and Friday night drinks at the pub, further strengthened these relationships and gave preservice teachers insight into the teaching community. Jane described the "*community vibe*" at her host primary school as "*different to a normal school*," noticing that the children were more appreciative of their learning and teachers.

The preservice teachers also actively participated in school life beyond their assigned classrooms. Jane's mentor entrusted her with managing the class during athletics day, and Noel supported a specific group throughout the placement, building his confidence to work with diverse learners. Programs like tree planting, farming skills, and breakfast club reflected the community's diversity and extended their experiences. Additionally, mentors offered guidance beyond the placement; Tarnia's mentor provided advice about university and career plans and Jane's mentor continued supporting her academic assignments. Both mentors "*kept in touch*" encouraging them to consider returning for future placements or employment. While the placements built strong connections within the school communities, engagement with the broader community was less

consistent. Jane and Tarnia discovered an all-abilities bowling night and volunteered weekly. Noel attended a local football match to experience local culture, and the group travelled to neighbouring areas. Joel described these community activities as "*kind of window shopping in a way*." Tarnia suggested that future placements could benefit from a community liaison to assist with finding volunteer opportunities and navigating broader community engagement. Although teacher educators had gathered information about the preservice teachers' hobbies and interests prior to the placement to connect them with relevant community groups, this initiative was not realised, leaving some preservice teachers' expressing regret.

The accommodation, which consisted of cabins near the schools, facilitated daily interactions and camaraderie among the preservice teachers. Jane described a "*family atmosphere*," resulting from nightly board games and debriefing sessions after school. Noel saw these moments as opportunities to exchange teaching ideas, often asking, "*I'm teaching this tomorrow, do you have any suggestions?*" For Joel, who experienced anxiety and self-doubt in the unfamiliar environment, these new friendships were important. He leaned on these friendships, his hobbies and phone conversations with loved ones to cope. However, the provided accommodation also presented some challenges due to disparities in cabin sizes, varying internet quality, and tension caused by one preservice teacher not participating in group activities.

The on-country cultural awareness workshop was a pivotal experience in shaping their perspectives. Tarnia valued the first-hand interaction with Indigenous leaders, as they deepened her understanding of Indigenous history and perspectives. Joel found the experience eye-opening, prompting reflection on his heritage: "*A lot of the stuff they talked about I hadn't known… it did change my perspective and how I will teach in the future.*" Jane was "*blown away*," while Tarnia reflected that "*there is so much more learning to do*." However, while the workshop enhanced their understanding of Indigenous cultural perspectives, there is further work to be done to explicitly connect this learning to their teaching or school experiences. Connecting the Schools and the preservice teachers to complete the experience together is a suggestion to remedy this issue for the future.

In 2024, four of the original ten preservice teachers returned to Kipleton for their fourth-year placement. They reported that the additional six-week placement was still too brief to form deeper connections outside of the school community. At the writing of this paper, all students are not sure of their career destinations.

Discussion

The concept of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), provides a critical lens for examining how the Kipleton placement worked to address metro-centric approaches and some of the challenges inherent in doing so. In the case of this regionally situated program, the placement itself is a figured world where teacher educators, mentors, and preservice teachers navigate their identities and interact within existing social and institutional structures. While geographically regional the identity of what makes a place non-metropolitan is subjective to multiple parties. This discussion explores how each group perceives their own and each other's identities, as well as how cultural and social structures shape their experiences. These dynamics occur within an institutional context where non-metropolitan teacher education is positioned within a broader policy framework that often prioritises by de-fault urban-centric models of teacher preparation (Ledger et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2024). This placement sought to challenge these models and yet some stakeholders wished for the same approaches even though the context was so very different.

The Metro-normative Figured World in Action

Metro-centric approaches (Ledger et al., 2021) shaped all stakeholder experiences within the Kipleton placement, with unique experiences, cultural workshops and immersion activities

considered essential to the program design. However, this approach reinforces what Downes and Roberts (2018) identified as the core problem; treating metropolitan placements as the norm while positioning non-metropolitan placements as deviations requiring special accommodations. Research highlights that rural schools are central to their communities and require reflexive approaches. Rather than treating rural placements as exceptions, we question if community-centred activities typical of non-metropolitan programs should become the standard for all teacher preparation placements.

The figured world that teacher educators inhabit is shaped by policy frameworks that emphasise preparing teachers for rural contexts' rather than recognising that effective teaching is always contextualised (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024). The intentional co-design included cultural responsiveness and teaching preparation for the 'rural' experience. While this program design was supportive of the preservice teachers, it was challenging to showcase all the unique affordances of Kipleton and as such there is always the risk of perpetuating a 'metro normative bias' (Downes & Roberts, 2018).

Mentors constructed a fundamentally different figured world, one centred on relational, place-conscious pedagogy (Willis & Louth, 2024), where identity formation was directly tied to school and student engagement. The mentors aligned with the notion of these preservice teachers being 'classroom ready' and 'community ready.' This dual preparation cannot be delivered through imposed activities (White & Kline, 2012), and the mentors' resistance to externally-designed immersion activities (beyond the school) was indicative of their understanding of the difference between what Macdonald et al. (2025) describe as superficial 'tourist' engagement and meaningful community connections .This divergence, between teacher educators and mentors, reflected a key tension between formalised expectations of cultural learning and the organic, experience-driven knowledge.

The "Window Shopping" Experience

The "*window shopping*" experience, as described by one of the preservice teachers Joel, involved observation and limited cultural engagement that resembled a tourist experience. This approach exemplifies what Macdonald et al. (2025) warns against; tourist like encounters that fail to create meaningful community connections. Such surface-level experiences make it particularly difficult to challenge preservice teachers' existing biases and beliefs. The study suggests that shifting beliefs and values is difficult if programs continue romanticised notions portraying non-metropolitan communities as inherently disadvantaged (Guenther & Fuqua, 2024).

However, there were transformative moments that challenged the preservice teachers' initial assumptions about Kipleton. These experiences included the uniquely inclusive nature of the Kipleton school environment, where staff knew the preservice teachers by name, welcomed them to the community, and invited them to staff social activities. These experiences were described as a stark contrast to their metropolitan school placements. Such moments of identity transformation illustrate the potential of these authentic engagements within genuinely welcoming school environments to shape preservice teachers' perspectives and professional identities.

Intention Versus Impact: Reproducing Hierarchical Figured Worlds

This research suggests that partnership approaches can inadvertently reproduce hierarchical figured worlds, despite collaborative intentions. While Kipleton mentors had professional identities deeply connected to their community, the placement structure still imposed external expectations that sometimes conflicted with their locally responsive approach. For example, preservice teachers participated in an on-country cultural awareness workshop to learn about Indigenous perspectives, yet mentors observed that these learnings were not clearly connected to their teaching practice. This disconnect highlights the on-going need for co-designed,

relational learning experiences where Indigenous educators and Indigenous Elders are active partners in teacher preparation. An approach aligned with Smith and Smith's (2019) advocacy for meaningful integration of cultural knowledge into professional identities rather than add-on experiences.

While funding and policy discussions emphasise investment in non-metropolitan teacher education, the real challenge lies in aligning these efforts with the lived experiences of educators and their communities. Mentors in this research identified systemic barriers to recruiting and retaining teachers to Kipleton, including inadequate accommodation, limited mentoring programs, and insufficient preparation for teaching in these settings. Federal policy, as reflected in the previously mentioned Halsey Review and the government's response, tends to frame initial teacher education as the primary issue behind teacher attrition in non-metropolitan areas. However, this narrow focus overlooks more significant contributing factors such as housing and preparation. James et al. (2025) argues that Initial Teacher Education providers are often unfairly held accountable for solving complex systemic problems without adequate support or recognition of the structural barriers they face.

The literature reveals a persistent pattern. Despite government reports emphasising the importance of deep, practice-based partnerships between universities and schools (Paul et al., 2023; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014) short-term funding cycles to initial teacher education providers and rigid institutional structures continue to position schools largely as recipients rather than active co-designers (Martin & Mulvihill, 2020). The Kipleton experience illustrates this tension—even with numerous supportive approaches, the placement remained vulnerable to being perceived as a temporary, alternate, optional placement for preservice teachers rather than an equal partner in teacher development. This is a finding that requires larger systemic change in the ways in which we prepare preservice teachers for all educational contexts.

From Metro-normative to Place-conscious Figured Worlds

These findings suggest that the path forward requires the creation of new figured worlds that move from compliance-based models towards relational, place-based collaborations (Murphy et al, 2024) which honour local educational priorities and needs. Such an approach positions schools as co-leaders rather than implementers, recognising their expertise in shaping teacher preparation in ways that align with the realities of non-metropolitan-based teaching.

Transformation requires what Green et al. (2019) as well as O'Grady (2017) identify as community-led partnerships, where local knowledge and expertise are recognised as central rather than peripheral to initial teacher education. This means restructuring funding models, decision making processes, and program design to privilege place-based expertise over institutional convenience.

Limitations

The limitations of this research include its contextual specificity, as focusing on a single regionally-situated placement in one community limits the generalisability of the findings to other non-metropolitan areas. The short three-week duration of the placement also impacts the depth of the stakeholders' perspectives, and future studies exploring stakeholder perspectives over longer placements would provide additional insight. Additionally, the study does not attempt to address the full complexity of systematic issues, such as broader policy impacts, and lacks comparison with other similar placements, limiting the ability to assess the unique challenges of non-metropolitan placements more broadly. These limitations highlight the need for further research, particularly to examine current policies and co-design of similar placement opportunities in teacher education.

Conclusion

While funding and policy emphasise investment in non-metropolitan teacher education, the Kipleton context reveals the ongoing risk of a systemic misalignment between these efforts and the lived experiences and long-term needs of this community. Although one preservice teacher described the placement as "*window shopping*," as observing from the outside, the experience transcended this superficial characterisation, providing meaningful insights into the professional connections and personal rewards of regional teaching. This exposure broadened preservice teachers' understanding of diverse opportunities, and lay foundations for future engagement in such contexts.

However, expecting placements to address teacher shortages is unrealistic. This research suggests that placements, while valuable, cannot alone resolve the deeper structural and relational factors influencing long-term workforce sustainability in rural areas.

Despite genuine collaborative efforts, policy timelines, geographical distance, and resource constraints prevented full realisation of the program's co-design aspirations. This resulted in mentor perspectives not being fully integrated into the program development. This outcome reflected not a failure of the practice but the inherent challenges of short-term policy approaches that underestimate the time and resources required for authentic co-design and partnership development.

The intention-impact gap in non-metropolitan placements represents not only a design problem but a figured world problem. Moving forward requires creating new figured worlds that position non-metropolitan teaching as a contextualised practice rather than an alternative preparation option. This necessitates a fundamental shift from metro-centric models towards approaches that centre local knowledge and community voices as essential contributors to, rather than recipients of, teacher education.

By building on the demonstrated success of such placements and integrating deeper, sustained opportunities for community engagement, the sector can begin bridging the intention-impact gap. With genuine commitment to co-design, rural placements can evolve from brief encounters into transformative experiences that authentically prepare and inspire the next generation of teachers for such communities. This transformation requires recognition that effective non-metropolitan teacher education demands genuinely place-based approaches that honour the complexity and richness of these contexts.

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