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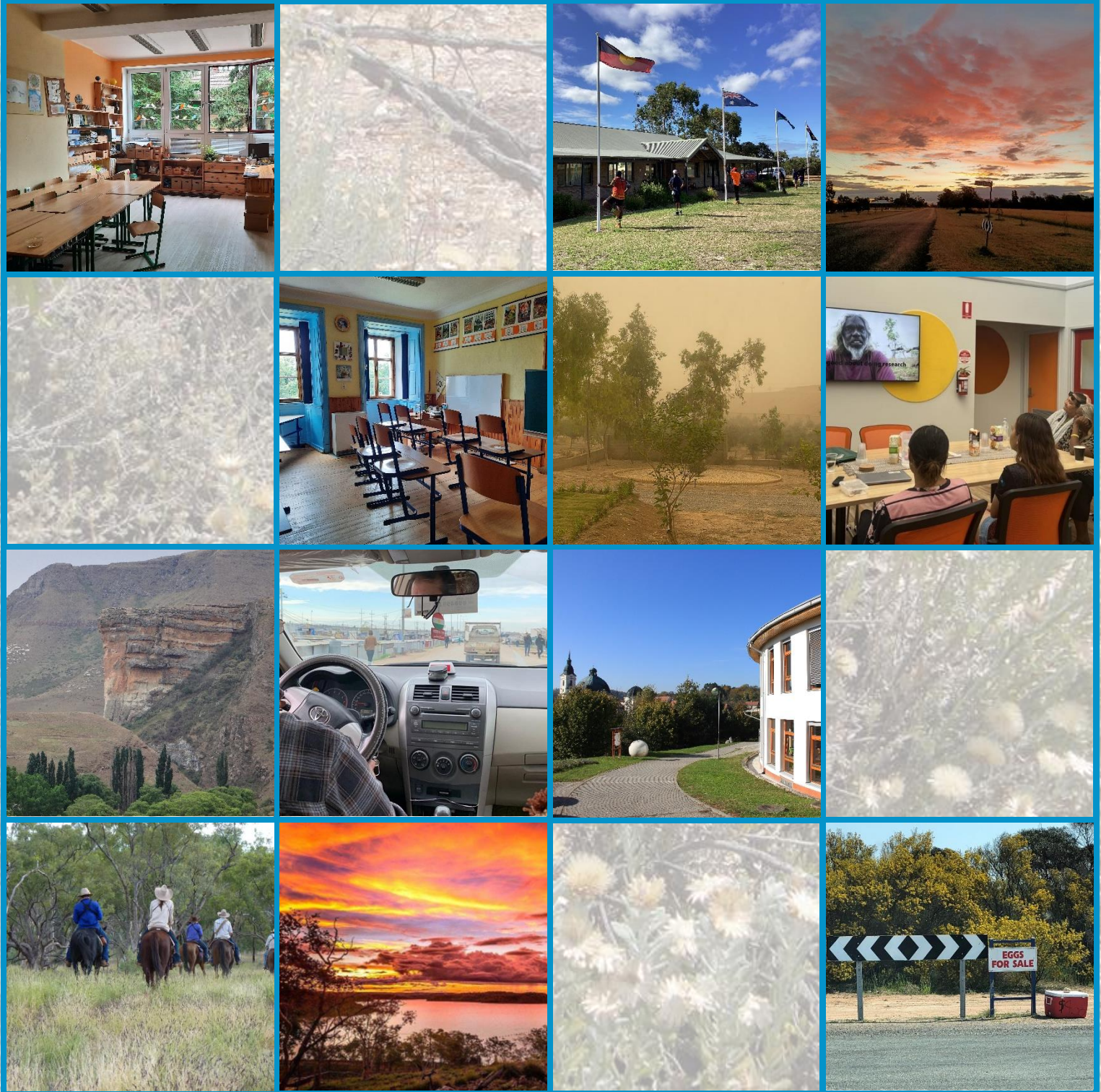
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Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

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RURAL CONNECTIONS

BOOK REVIEW

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What Does a Quality Education Look Like in Rural Schools?

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Abstract

This issue of the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education features articles that describe and critically analyse rural education, the common thread being 'What Does a Quality Education Look Like in Rural Schools?'. The education settings discussed include Australia, Czechia, Iraq, South Africa, Sweden, Tanzania, and the United States. The studies presented reflect the huge diversity of rural schooling and the many factors that work to support quality education. What does quality rural education look like? It looks like teachers who have a strong connection to place, with strategies for teaching that connect with students from the place. It looks like teachers who are flexible and open to learning. It looks like a supportive system. It looks attractive to parents. It looks like contextualised learning. It looks like parents and communities engaged in their children's learning at school. It is potentially transformative. It looks like a workforce that has good access to professional learning options. It looks like good governance, with local Elders and community leaders involved and driving a vision for education. It looks like strong peer relationships, and a culturally safe learning environment. It *does not* necessarily look like the narrowly defined metrics that are often used to define success or the deficits that are too often described in association with rural education.

Keywords: quality education, rural schools, rural education, contextually responsive education, school-community partnerships, transformative education

Editorial

There is a school of thought suggesting that a quality education is all about performance and outcomes, which then lead to economic benefits (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). Quality, in this view of education: "*has to do with matters of effectiveness and efficiency*" (Biesta, 2023, p. 150)—It is measurable and competitive. Education then is a technical operation that produces graduates who have economic worth. Biesta points out that within a neoliberal hegemony "*many seem to think that questions about quality, about what good education is, can be resolved by technical means, such as in the ongoing obsession with generating evidence about what apparently 'works'*" (Biesta, 2023, p. 150). And while educational achievement is important, as the articles in this issue of the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education show, there are so many other considerations that all contribute to a quality education in rural schools.

Preservice Teacher Experiences

The article by Alison Willis and Sharon Louth tackles perhaps the most entrenched problem in rural education: the staffing of rural schools (Boylan, 2010; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Guenther et al., 2023; White, 2008). The authors share some of their findings from an ethnographic case study of recent University of the Sunshine Coast. In this paper, they used a survey to investigate the cultural, social, and professional experiences of new teachers in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) schools. Participants provided advice to future RRR teachers which Willis and Louth developed into a model for pre-determinations for pre-service teachers considering and preparing for RRR schools. This model for "*surviving and thriving in RRR teaching locations*" encourages pre-service teachers to consider their social, geographical, emotional, personal, and cultural contexts. Willis and Louth's work resonates with scholarly work that points to the need for beginning teachers to be prepared not just to be 'classroom-ready' but also 'community-ready' (see White & Kline, 2012). They also highlight the positive outlook of the participants about their RRR teaching, which is encouraging in the current nation-wide teacher shortage.

Context

Robyn Henderson and Sazan Mandalawi dive into the disconnect between the PISA's (Programme for International Student Assessment) representations of education and their own experiences 'on the ground' as rural education researchers. Using semi-structured interviews and observations, they created and analysed three case study narratives about education in a girls' refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a remote school in western Queensland Australia, and the Migrant Education Program in rural Illinois. They identified four pillars of quality education in these rural places: context relevance, educators' openness to learning, flexibility of teaching/learning approaches, and responsiveness to learners' needs. The educators' focus on the local context—teaching students in their own contexts while preparing them for possible future contexts—was at odds with the images of more global education presented by the Organisation for Economic and Community Development (OECD). Quality education was something different in each location and educators tailored their pedagogies to suit their students' needs, not the placeless priorities of PISA.

Transformative Curriculum and Pedagogy

Blandina Daniel Mazzuki and Sarah Vicent Chiwamba explored the role of initial teacher education in promoting transformative curriculum and pedagogy to counter the strong deficit views on rural education in Tanzania. They argue that in order to improve rural education, a more positive and tailored curriculum is needed in teacher education before the benefits can flow onto schools. Through semi-structured interviews with teacher educators and focus groups with preservice teachers, they found that under the current system, both teacher educators and preservice teachers considered it the government's role, not theirs, to improve the quality of rural education. The authors draw on a robust, international body of literature to unpack their findings and to propose ways that work within their education system to improve the quality of rural education to the benefit of students.

School Attractiveness

Dominik Dvořák, Silvie Rita Kučerová, Ladislav Zilcher and Zdeněk Svoboda explore the concept of 'community' and 'magnet' schools, in their article about attractive rural schools in Czechia. These two types mirror the potentially competing demands of schools to be both financially viable and provide a quality education that meets community expectations. The findings of the research point to the potentially negative effects of 'school choice', which on the one hand may benefit parents and students, but which disadvantage 'community' schools that rely on enrolments (and therefore funding) from 'catchment zones'. In the Czech context, there are no publicly available school-level performance results, so parents make choices based on their

perception of what a 'good school' looks like. This then may lead school governance bodies and leaders to focus on school image rather than quality of teaching and learning.

Czechia is a relatively small country, and distances between rural communities and schools are not as great as they might be in more sparsely populated rural areas of other countries where school choice may not play a huge role (except in larger regional centres). As an example, for secondary education in rural and remote Australia, perception of education quality, and even the perception of choice, is marketed to parents, particularly when boarding school is the only option for secondary education—even when the choice is a 'choice-less' one (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Mander et al., 2015). And just as it does in Czechia, these perceptions skew the dynamics of secondary provision for rural and remote students. Those who have the necessary resources or 'capital' (or can access a scholarship) are more likely to have access to a better education than those who do not have that access (Osborne et al., 2019). Meanwhile parents who have the resources, believe that their children are getting a 'better' education, and those who do not are forced to take up the very limited options that are available in their home communities. While 'choice' might be seen to be a good thing by some, as Dvořák and colleagues' article demonstrates it is not necessarily an equitable thing (James et al., 2021).

Social Space, Pedagogy and Identity

Annette Morphett, Lisa O'Keefe and Kathryn Paige connect the concepts of social space, identity and pedagogy in the context of rural mathematics. They suggest that in their research context—the South Australian Yorke Peninsula—rural schools are under-theorised in their practice and face imposed identity deficits. The theories of 'rural social space' have been well developed over the last 15 years (Kline et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2010; White, 2015), but the intersection between rural social space, pedagogy and identity provides a novel adaptation and application of the theories relating to all three concepts. While Morphett and colleagues have focused on mathematics, there is no reason why their *Blueprint* could not be adapted for other curriculum areas. The *Blueprint* (or adaptations of it) could be particularly useful as a way for new teachers coming to a rural school to think through how their school's context (as rural space) connects with who they are (their identity as teachers and rural residents) and how they teach (their pedagogy). In some ways, this article makes good common sense, but so often we read of concerns about the 'quality' of rural teachers and teaching, as if the metrocentric view of the world is the only way to be and to teach. Good pedagogy will always be contextualised (as suggested by Henderson and Mandalawi in their article), it will always take account of learners' needs and will always be reflected in the knowledge and character of teachers. The *Blueprint* provides a sound theoretical bases for teachers and teacher educators to adapt to rural contexts.

Parent-community-school Partnerships

Nomazulu Ngozwana, Maphuthi Lepholletse, Thulani Chauke, and Amohelang Machobane examine parental involvement in rural schools in Limpopo Province of South Africa. While the research does not claim to generalise the findings to other schools or regions, the data confirms the importance of parent-community-school partnerships in children's education, consistent with international literature on this topic, with variations on the theme dependent on context (see for example Fricker et al., 2022; Kilpatrick et al., 2023; Zuckerman, 2020). Relationship building between parents and teachers/principals requires intentional work, but as noted by the authors, the benefits of strong partnerships are evidenced in increased emotional support for children, careers advice, modelling positive attitudes and potential learning outcomes. There are of course also benefits for school governance and financial management of resources. Referring back to the article by Dvořák and colleagues, one of the elements that makes a school 'good' or attractive, is the strength of the relationship between the school and the community. It is not just about grades and achievement.

Collaborative Professional Support for Quality Special Education

Kristina Ström, Gerd Pettersson, and Kim Wickman unpack the benefits and challenges around the professional support system for special educators in rural Sweden, making important contributions to under-researched areas of rural education—special education and inclusive education (Guenther et al., 2023). Using an online questionnaire with both teachers and special education consultants, they provide details about what is working well in the team approach to supporting teachers and students with special needs but also identify what elements require improvement. There were concerns around professional commitment, communication, trust, and the perpetual rural education problems with distance and technology in terms of accessing resources. Encouragingly, Ström and colleagues found this collaborative style of professional learning and support to have contributed to a sense of greater professional competence in special education, increased access to more professional development, and worked best with meaningful consultation. The challenges and opportunities with this form of professional learning also resonate with those faced by rural educators more broadly. The system of a centralised specialist supporting a number of teachers in different rural schools in-person and online, contributes to providing quality, tailored education for all students in rural places.

Equitable Access to Higher Education in Remote Australia: Making Pathways Visible

Andréa Jaggi, Kevin Guyurruyurru Rogers, Helen Gabibi Rogers, Annette Yulumburruja Daniels, and Emilie Ens present a case study of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, located in southeast Arnhem Land. While this is not a 'rural school' the challenges and success factors discussed are not dissimilar to those faced by remote schools. Wuyagiba Bush Uni was designed to create a pathway for aspiring First Nations students from remote communities in the Northern Territory to be able to study at university. The quality of the education provided is underpinned by a both-ways learning approach that gives equal weight to traditional knowledge ('cultural units') and western knowledge ('academic units'), which are awarded as micro-credentials through Macquarie University and on completion, count towards a semester of bachelor level study. Quality education is also reflected in the governance of the program, which is led by senior Elders from the region. The impact of the program is not only about completions—a little over half of those enrolled complete the micro-credentials—but about inspiring leadership, learning, employment and encouraging school-aged students to engage in learning, so they can 'see what they can be', an approach that has been recognised as a key mechanism for successful engagement in learning at any level in remote communities (Guenther et al., 2017; Guenther et al., 2015; Kinnane et al., 2014; Wilks et al., 2020). The case study highlights what is possible when culturally safe spaces and practices are applied in an educational setting.

Metrics of Quality Education

The Rural Connections article by Cat Holmes, John Guenther, Gavin Morris, Doris O'Brien, Jennifer Inkamala, Jessie Wilson and Rasharna McCormack, presents a case study of a unique school in central Australia in the context of research about engagement and retention for First Nations students in remote and very remote locations. Yipirinya School, located in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) was established in 1978 by Elders to address the lack of education for Town Camp children. The school offers students learning in Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte languages as well as English. It supports 'two-way' learning for First Nations children. The research is premised on an assumption that quality education requires regular attendance, engagement and retention, which in many remote schools, is well below what is considered adequate for strong educational outcomes. Yipirinya is in some ways no different, with an average attendance rate of just 35 per cent in 2023. However, as we noted at the start of this editorial, the metrics of the neoliberal system, do not necessarily capture what quality really looks like. The case study demonstrates some of the factors that contribute to quality: relationships, purposeful learning and cultural safety. This school does not adopt a 'black box'

approach of quality education (Muhamedyev et al., 2020). It employs innovate approaches to improve learning opportunities for children and young people while retaining its focus on language and culture. Holmes and her colleagues conclude:

> *The definition of attendance needs to be reconceptualised to meet the localised, holistic needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. Alone, the measurement of attendance fails to capture the complexities and nuances required to provide contextually purposeful teaching and learning.*

Student Perspectives on Attendance and Engagement

In the second Rural Connections article, Rhonda Oliver, Helen CD McCarthy, and Lissy Jackson share a case study of Wongutha Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed Vocational Education and Training School, a boarding school for Aboriginal students in remote Western Australia. With current students as co-researchers, they uncover the factors that keep students engaged and attending school. Students reported that a positive, supportive environment with a clear purpose for the curriculum are vital elements. This involves fostering strong relationships with peers, staff, and the wider community; promoting a culturally safe environment with ongoing connections to the local and students' home communities and staff that recognise their culture and ways of 'being and doing'; and a focus on preparing them for work after their schooling. These practices are not dissimilar to those applied in the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, in the case study presented by Jaggi and colleagues. Attendance is "*not an issue*" at Wongutha, suggesting they are providing their students with a quality educational experience that is relevant and enjoyable to them. In the wider consideration of 'what is quality education', student voices are critical to uncovering what is important in *their* contexts for *their* futures.

Equitable Quality Education

Dipane Hlalele's book review of Cornish and Taole's (2021) *Perspectives on Multigrade Teaching: Research and Practice in South Africa and Australia,* summarises and sheds light on an issue facing many small rural schools in Australia and South Africa. Hlalele identifies that this book considers many of the issues associated with 'deficit lenses' or problems. In relation the chapter on application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), he rightly points to the dated literature having missed out 'on current discourses'. The application of technologies to support rural and remote learning is rapidly changing, as we noted in the last issue of the Journal (Guenther et al., 2023), and the latest developments in thinking about how multigrade classes can benefit from ICT should have been better considered in this book. And generally, we agree with Hlalele's assessment of the book, that we 'need to look deeper into the phenomenon of locally or home-brewed strategies'. A quick reading of the book reveals that the authors believe that multigrade classrooms present a challenge to provision of 'equitable quality education' based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Sustainable Development, 2023), which perhaps ironically dances with the metrics of neoliberal 'quality'. The trap which we as rural and remote education researchers often fall into, is to draw on the metrics of deficit and disadvantage to justify what we call a pursuit of 'equity'. Hlalele correctly asserts that Australia has 'plentiful resources' in contrast to South Africa. But for all Australia's resources, it seems the political will to drive equitable outcomes for some of the most marginalised people—First Nations in particular—is not there. It seems that schools themselves, in Australia at least, are not ready to provide these young people with an 'equitable' education despite the 'good intentions' (Anderson et al., 2023) of policies designed to do this. The same may well be true in South Africa.

Conclusions

Markers of 'quality' education in rural places both extend beyond and contribute to the neoliberal measurable metrics. The articles in this issue suggest that 'quality' rural education needs to be bespoke to its context. That requires careful consideration of the particular people, places, resources, relationships and temporality. These broader, contextualised markers of quality education in rural places should reflect local priorities and aspirations. This more relevant approach to education should be more engaging to rural youths which in turn may contribute to 'better' measurable outcomes—indeed many of the articles in this issue demonstrate these qualities. By recognising and promoting 'what works' in rural schools—what is considered quality and successful—we can continue to push back against pervasive deficit discourses.

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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
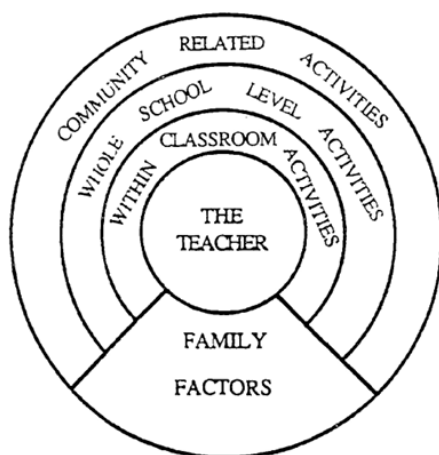
Teachers' decisions to stay or leave RRR locations are complex and varied (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015) and may be personal or systemic or an interplay between personal and systemic influences and cultures (Boylan, 1993). The Versland et al. (2022) study noted the influence of the school administrator (principal) 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*
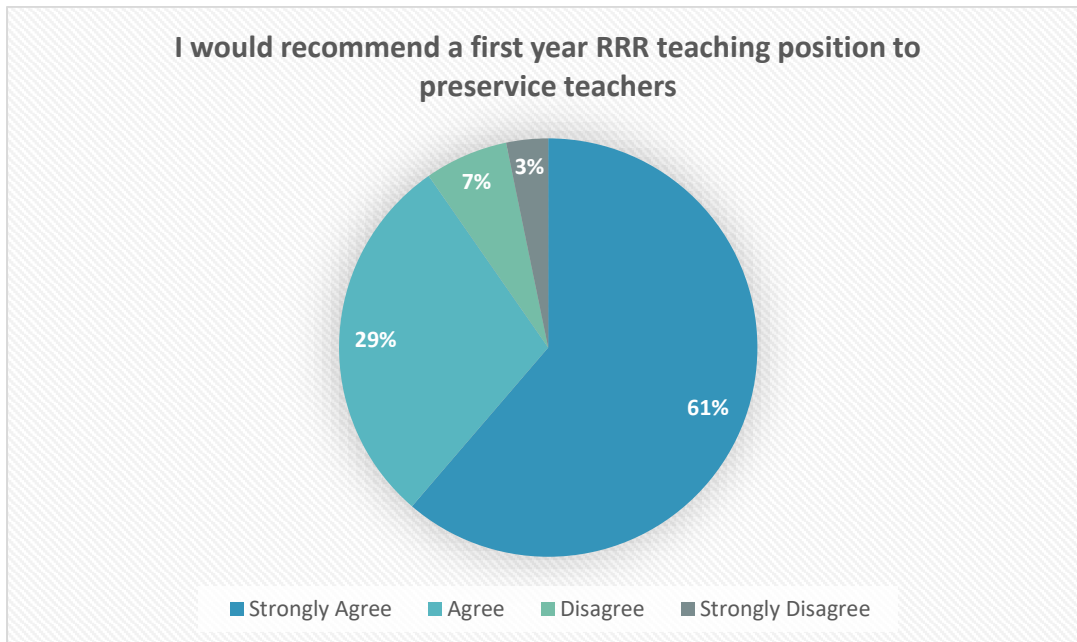
When participants need support, Table 4 shows they are most likely to turn to family members (93.76% total affirmative responses in the always and sometimes categories) and colleagues at school (93.75% affirmative). This highlights the importance of professional relationships and family support. Participants 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*

Social: Build professional and social networks with the goal of making friends

Cultural: Learn from and seek to understand community dynamics

Geographical: Explore your local area, get outside and get involved in community events and groups

Surviving and thriving in RRR teaching locations

Personal: Develop healthy habits to fortify your resilience

Emotional: have a positive mindset and get out of your comfort zone

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%

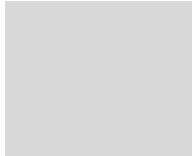|		How would you describe your geographical location?			Years of teaching experience		How would you describe your work experience and career stage:	
		REMOTE. Ten (10) or more hours' drive from the Qld coast between Brisbane and Cooktown, or one (1) or more hours' drive north or northwest of Cooktown.	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%

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

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Literature Review

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Study and its Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Three Case Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

Context Relevance

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Educators' Openness to Learning

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

Flexibility of the Teaching/Learning

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

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

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

Responsiveness to Learners' Needs

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Transforming Rural Teaching: Teacher Educators and Pre-service Teachers' Perspectives on Transformative Curriculum and Pedagogy

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines preparation of pre-service teachers for altering rural teaching through transformative curriculum and pedagogy. The study gathered the perspectives of 45 participants belonging to two universities in Tanzania, namely University of Dar es Salaam (Dar es Salaam University College of Education) and Sokoine University of Agriculture School of Education. The findings indicate that geographically isolated rural schools are associated with deficits resulting in poor quality of teaching and learning. Further, the findings establish that teacher educators and pre-service teachers are not open to transforming rural teaching. This has implications for the effectiveness of university teacher education provided. To develop pre-service teachers' openness to transforming rural teaching, there is a need for transformative curriculum and pedagogy in teacher education. A transformative curriculum should include diverse knowledge of teaching contexts and be implemented through critical dialogue and reflective pedagogy.

Keywords: *pre-service teachers, transforming, rural teaching, curriculum, pedagogy.*

Introduction and Background

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Summit report (2023) asserts that education transformation begins with teachers. Therefore, teacher education should support and empower pre-service teachers to "*transform themselves as future teachers, become agents of change and guides for understanding complex realities of teaching in diverse contexts*" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023, p.14). Transformative teacher education should provide pre-service teachers with knowledge, values, skills, and attitudes to be resilient, adaptable, and prepared for an uncertain future and sustainable development. Moreover, pre-service teachers should develop an understanding of the realities of teaching in diverse contexts and how education is affected by inequalities globally and within countries. Global and within-country inequalities have affected students' learning, including those in rural schools. Within countries, there is an inequality between urban and rural schools in terms of the quality of education provided (Arsen et al., 2022; Center for Public Education, 2023; Brenner et al., 2022; Hartman et al., 2022; Lian et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2023). Since most of the population, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, is in rural areas (World Bank, 2022a), it is important to examine the transformation of pre-service teachers in teacher education in order to equip them with knowledge and skills for transforming teaching in rural schools (Robinson-Pant, 2023).

Teaching in Rural Schools

Most rural schools are characterised by geographical isolation, insufficient social services (Aikaeli et al., 2021; Echazarra & Radinger, 2019; Huguette, 2021), and/or a lack of teachers and teachers with limited qualifications due to inadequate professional development programs (Arinaitwe & Corbett, 2022; Center for Public Education, 2023; Dlamini et al., 2022; Raleigh & Coleman, 2020; Wineman et al., 2020). Rural schools have inadequate teaching and learning resources (Raleigh & Coleman, 2020; Hartman et al., 2022; Lian et al., 2023; Lindsjö, 2018), and are characterised by poverty and lower education levels of parents (Cheung, 2021; Thompson, 2021).

Geographical isolation, limited resources and poverty prevent rural teachers from providing learners the same teaching and learning opportunities as in urban schools. The shortage of teachers and poorly qualified teachers in rural schools lower the quality of teaching in terms of teaching instructions and professionalism which are crucial for students' learning (Cheung, 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Rural teaching is restricted by access to technology and digital divides as rural teachers are not able to integrate digital technology into teaching and learning (Tsoka et al., 2023). The teaching skills of rural teachers result in rote learning (Center for Public Education, 2023; Li et al., 2020), which inhibits higher-level learning skills among learners. Subsequently, rural learners are in danger of failing and dropping out due to less meaningful learning experiences (Tsoka et al., 2023). Studies by Cheung (2021) and the Center for Public Education (2023) show that educational inequality between rural and urban schools adds to the academic achievement gap among rural students and minimizes their opportunities to engage in higher education, causing a cycle of poverty in rural areas.

Despite the challenges faced by rural teachers in providing quality education, they are tied to better performance and accountability (Cuervo, 2012;2016). While there is a demand for better performance and accountability, rural teachers have limited time to reflect on their work and face the pressures of a high workload. (Cuervo, 2016; León et al., 2024). Rural teachers lack recognition and autonomy and rarely participate in decision-making, influencing their work (Cuervo, 2016; Vural & Konakli, 2022). Rural teachers feel that they are marginalised and not valued. There is a need for social justice where education systems should recognise different social contexts, distribute resources equitably between rural and urban schools and promote teachers' autonomy and participation in decision-making (Cuervo, 2012; Gaete et al., 2023; Gewirtz, 2006).

The Role of Teacher Education in Transforming Pre-service Teachers

Teachers have a primary and central responsibility to contribute to the quality provision of education in rural schools (Riddle et al., 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2023; Tran et al., 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Teacher education has a role in supporting pre-service teachers to transform themselves and become agents of change in rural schools (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Quan et al., 2019). As agents of change, pre-service teachers should develop resilience and be empowered to search for solutions to rural teaching challenges instead of resisting them (Boniface, 2019; Cheng et al., 2023; White, 2015). In this sense, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to be creative and apply critical thinking, problem-solving and social-emotional skills to utilise rural resources (Troop, 2017). For effective utilisation of rural resources, teacher education should create awareness among pre-service teachers about opportunities in rural communities that can be used to improve and change rural teaching (Boniface, 2019; Cheng et al., 2023; Nyoni, 2020; White, 2015). There are many positive attributes found in rural areas such as natural resources, community engagement, lower costs of living, natural environment and social capital (Arinaitwe & Corbett, 2023; Brenner et al., 2022; Lian et al., 2023; OECD, 2020; Tran et al., 2020; Wineman et al., 2020). Therefore, raising awareness of the available opportunities in rural communities empowers pre-service teachers to use the resources around them to transform the quality of teaching in rural schools.

However, the success of transformational creativity, enquiry and curiosity depends on awareness of contexts, a clear understanding of the different dimensions of what needs to be transformed, and the commitment to transformation (Alshumaimeri, 2022; Brenner et al., 2022). Additionally, transformational curiosity depends on curricula that appreciate the epistemology and diverse vision, reflections of students' values and commitment from management (Filho et al., 2018). Therefore, teacher education programs need to implement changes in teacher training by giving attention to critical elements of curriculum and pedagogy (Pickering, 2019).

The Transformative Teacher Education Curriculum

Transformative teacher education curriculum reflects pre-service teachers' lived diverse experiences, including the difficulties and challenges contributing to their preparation for teaching (Riddle et al., 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2023). At its heart, a transformative curriculum should be holistic and accommodate pre-service teachers' experiences of place and purpose (Resch, 2020; Riddle et al., 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023; Troop, 2017). Transformative curriculum needs to be epistemic (Annala, 2022), neutral (Lane & Waldron, 2021; Weinberg et al., 2020), and relate to local communities in which pre-service teachers live (Brenner et al., 2022; Robinson-Pant, 2023). The curriculum should cover both formal and informal aspects of pre-service teachers' learning experiences, including social behaviour in real-life teaching practices (Leibowitz, 2017). However, adopting a holistic and epistemic curriculum in teacher education is challenging due to the presence of a standardised national curriculum. The standardised national curriculum has been an obstacle to achieving diverse educational goals due to set standards, conventional pedagogical models and established national professional standards (Annala, 2022; Robinson-Pant, 2023).

Standardised curricula of education systems, including teacher education, do not prepare and support pre-service teachers for transformation (Annala, 2022; Cheung, 2021; Lian et al., 2023; Quan et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023). A standardised curriculum makes it difficult for pre-service teachers to view themselves as agents of change who can transform themselves and their classrooms (Nyoni, 2020; Riddle et al., 2023; Weinberg et al., 2020). A rich and holistic curriculum that accommodates pre-service teachers' experiences provides relevance to teaching, prepares them for teaching work, and gives them opportunities for engagement with teaching knowledge connected to critical understandings of society (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Resch, 2020; Riddle et al., 2023). When teacher education adapts the curriculum to meet community needs and strengths, pre-service teachers may have reasons to develop place consciousness, creativity, enthusiasm, patriotism, and professional identity in solving rural teaching challenges (Brenner et al., 2022; Reagan et al., 2019).

Transformative Classroom Pedagogy

An authentic transformational curriculum requires a classroom pedagogy that leads to transformative learning of pre-service teachers (Riddle et al., 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2023; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018). A process-oriented classroom pedagogy is preferable to a knowledge-transferring pedagogy (Brenner et al., 2022; Omodan & Addam, 2022; Robinson-Pant, 2016; Yüner, 2020). According to Freire (1998), the former involves critical pedagogy, which makes pre-service teachers conscious of positive change in society through the connection between individual student experiences and society. Omodan and Addam (2022) also explain that critical pedagogy connects pre-service teachers with social constructions of knowledge, dispositions, and actions for transformation through classroom dialogues.

Dialogues reflect pre-service teachers' frame of reference regarding realities, experiences and thinking, enabling them to learn how to teach in varied contexts (Mezirow, 2003; Underhill, 2021). Through critical dialogues, teacher educators and pre-service teachers decode the hidden codes,

negotiate meaning, reality and experiences, and reconstruct reality (Cui & Tea, 2023; Singh, 2021; Underhill, 2021). Pre-service teachers who use critical dialogues and praxis are prepared with critical thinking and interpersonal skills (Cui & Teo, 2023; Song et al., 2022). These skills enable them to participate in and implement a range of educational goals, practices, and processes to meet teaching expectations. Apart from critical dialogues, pre-service teachers may work collaboratively in groups, analysing various problems concerning rural teaching and generating knowledge with solutions (van Tol, 2017). Working in groups develops social relations and collaborative problem-solving skills among them; not only at universities but also in communities they are going to teach after graduation.

In most cases, teaching in teacher education colleges and universities focuses on knowledge transfer rather than process pedagogy (Annala, 2022; Omodan & Addam, 2022; Milenković & Dimitrijević, 2019). When teaching is applied as a transmission of knowledge, it treats knowledge as something fixed and ignores the learner's social history, thinking, and creativity. Transfer of knowledge is considered unproductive and overbearing as it does not equip pre-service teachers with transformative skills such as critical thinking, reflection, creativity, and problem-solving (Milenković, & Dimitrijević, 2019). Transformational classroom pedagogy should orient pre-service teachers with transformative learning focusing on experience, inquiry, creativity, and curiosity (Pickering, 2019; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023). Teacher educators should value, visualise, and integrate rural places in classroom discourse to empower pre-service teachers to transform their rural teaching frame of reference (Hasnat & Greenwood, 2021; Gouwens & Henderson, 2021).

Purpose and Research Questions

The Tanzania Development Vision 2025 aims at developing active citizenship and professionals who can own development through hard work, professionalism, creativity, and solving society's problems (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2018). However, studies indicate that teaching in rural schools is challenging due to a shortage of teachers, inadequate social services, as well as insufficient teaching and learning resources (Dlamini et al., 2022; Kayuki & Lekule, 2022; Lindsjö, 2018; Utafiti Elimu Tanzania, 2023). Graduate teachers are not ready to be posted to teach in rural schools, and rural novice teachers do not commit themselves to working hard and solving rural teaching problems (Boniface, 2019; Kayuki & Lekule, 2022). Instead of seeking solutions to the challenges surrounding rural schools, novice teachers leave the profession or relocate to urban schools, which leads to teachers' attrition in rural schools (Aikaeli et al., 2021; Huguette, 2021; Wineman et al., 2020). The current study examines how university teacher education prepares pre-service teachers for transforming rural teaching concerning their own and teacher educators' perspectives on transformative curriculum and pedagogy. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. Are teacher educators and pre-service teachers willing to transform rural teaching?
2. What are teacher educators' and pre-service teachers' perspectives on transformative curriculum?
3. Which classroom pedagogies are appropriate for a transformative curriculum?

Theoretical Underpinnings

The study is grounded in transformative learning. Transformative learning is "*the process of effecting change in peoples' frames of reference*" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Hoggan and Finnegan (2023) define transformative learning as a process that affects people's experience, conceptualisation, and interaction with the world. Transformative learning recognises that learners have different assumptions, expectations, and beliefs that help them make sense of their world (Mabwe et al., 2024). Transformative learning grounds this study since it has been recognised to be a crucial means

of ensuring that education can contribute to the transformation and attainment of sustainable development (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023). Therefore, ensuring that education contributes to the achievement of sustainable development needs university pre-service teachers' engagement in transformative learning (Janssens et al., 2022).

Drawing from Mezirow's transformative learning theory, transformative learning focuses on changing learners' prior frames of reference to new understandings (Mezirow, 1997; 2000; 2003) and according to Mezirow (1997), changing of frames of references bases on two dimensions of habits of mind which represents abstract and habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. The second dimension is the point of view, which includes beliefs, value judgments, attitudes, and feelings that shape a particular interpretation. Changes in frames of reference happen through learners' critical reflection on their prior assumptions to understand and validate the meaning of new ideas (Mezirow, 2000).

In the context of this study, pre-service teachers' perceptions are expected to be changed through a neutral curriculum and critical reflection of rural teaching by understanding practices that do not work in rural schools. Teacher educators need to pose rural teaching problems that incorporate critical dialogues and discussions around pre-service teachers' experiences through whole classroom discussions or small group discussions. These discussions should assess reasons, examine the evidence, and arrive at a reflective judgment and alternatives for the problems. Through dialogues, knowledge is constructed, deconstructed, and generated to transform learning, related skills, attitudes, and beliefs.

Methods

Setting of the Research

The study employs a qualitative research approach to enable the researchers to gain deeper insights and understanding of how university teacher education can transform pre-service teachers to be agents of change for rural teaching. The researchers examine the willingness of teacher educators and pre-service teachers to transform rural teaching and their perspectives on transformative curriculum and classroom pedagogies. The study was conducted in two government universities that train teachers: the University of Dar es Salaam and the Sokoine University of Agriculture. At the University of Dar es Salaam, one constituent college, Dar es Salaam University College of Education, was involved, and at the Sokoine University of Agriculture, the School of Education was engaged in the research.

Selection of Participants

The study includes 45 participants: nine teacher educators and 36 pre-service teachers. All teacher educators were selected according to their experiences of teaching in either rural primary schools or secondary schools before they were employed to teach at the universities. All pre-service teachers were second and third years who had conducted their teaching practice in rural schools in two regions. Both regions are located in the central zone of Tanzania, one of the zones with the highest poverty, according to the World Bank (2022b). They are among the five regions in the country with the least level of economic development (Aikaeli et al., 2021). Literature asserts that most of the rural schools are isolated and characterised by poverty (Cheung, 2021; Li et al., 2020; Thompson, 2021). From the two regions, six geographically isolated schools were identified with assistance from teaching practice coordinators of both regions.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data from teacher educators and pre-service teachers. Face-to-face interviews capture emotions and verbal and non-verbal actions for the purpose of deepening understanding of the topic under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers conducted nine interviews (four at Sokoine University of Agriculture and five at Dar es Salaam University College of Education). The pre-service teachers' focus group discussions generated collective rich data built on each other's responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Six focus group discussions were conducted at Sokoine University of Agriculture and Dar es Salaam University College of Education. The researchers developed an interview guide tool for face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. The tool examined the participants' willingness to transform rural teaching and their perspectives on transformative curriculum and pedagogy. Interviews and the focus group discussions were recorded, and the collected data were transcribed. The resulting data were imported into the MAXQDA software for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The research clearances to conduct studies in Dar es Salaam University College of Education and Sokoine University of Agriculture were obtained from the office of the Vice Chancellor at the University of Dar es Salaam. The clearance letters introduced the researchers to the Regional and District Administrative Secretaries and the College Principals of Dar es Salaam University College of Education and Sokoine University of Agriculture. The confidentiality of information was maintained by not disclosing the names of regions, schools and participants. Teacher educators and pre-service teachers were labelled as TE and PST, respectively. All participants signed the informed consent forms to confirm their voluntary participation.

Results

Rural Teaching in the Tanzanian Context

Both teacher educators and pre-service teachers defined rural schools as geographically isolated and far from municipalities. The participants revealed that most rural schools faced various challenges, including inadequately trained and under-qualified teachers, shortages of teaching and learning resources, and overcrowded classrooms. This situation created tension among both rural teachers and students. One of the teacher educators provided the following response: "*Teachers and students in rural schools have tensions and stress; they have lost hope, and the situation leads to inability of rural teachers to provide quality education*" (Dar es Salaam University College of Education - 1TE, 11 June 2022). Similarly, a focus group participant testified:

> *In a school where I conducted TP, there was shortage of teachers. Even the few teachers available were not able to fulfil their responsibilities due to inadequate time resulted from heavy workload. Generally, it was difficult for teachers to provide assistance and mentoring to pre-service teachers. As pre-service teachers, we were left to teach for ourselves in classrooms because teachers from whom we took the teaching subjects did not offer any support. (Dar es Salaam University College of Education 4PST – 1FGDs, 20 June 2022)*

Moreover, participants revealed that teaching in rural schools lacked creativity due to a shortage of teachers and under-qualified teachers, limited teaching materials and aids. Teaching was associated with rote learning, where students were given notes to copy without checking whether they understood the meaning of the notes. As a result, students memorised facts and reproduced them during the assessment. One of the teacher educators affirmed:

> *Rural students practice rote learning due to poor teaching which does not give them the chance to actively engage in the lesson and construct meaning of what they are learning.*

Teachers just give lesson notes to class leaders to copy for their fellow students. (Sokoine University of Agriculture - 2TE, 29 June 2022)

Teacher Educators and Pre-service Teachers' Willingness for Transformation

Most teacher educators and pre-service teachers were uncertain about wanting to transform teaching in rural schools. Both groups explained that it was the government's responsibility to deal with the problems and challenges related to teaching in rural schools. For example, the government must allocate adequate teaching and learning resources, and improve social services in rural schools. One focus group participant affirmed:

It is the role of the government to improve the teaching and learning process through provision of teaching and learning resources in rural schools. The government should build classrooms, employ the required number of teachers, and provide other teaching and learning resources. (Sokoine University of Agriculture -3PST- 3FGDs, 3 July 2022)

Similarly, during interviews, one of the teacher educators commented: *"We know that given our economic status, the government cannot provide sufficient teaching and learning resources in all schools, but we can invite NGOs and other agents…."* (Dar es Salaam University College of Education 2TE, 22 June 2022). Participants were aware of the locally available resources in rural schools. However, the lack of curiosity and creativity skills hindered both pre-service teachers during their teaching practice and rural teachers from using the resources. One of the focus group pre-service teachers made the following comment:

We find it difficult to utilise local resources found in rural schools during TP because we lack creativity. We are trained on preparing teaching resources, but the training focuses on the use of ready-made resources. The course does not orient us adequately to prepare teaching and learning materials using the available resources in school contexts. (Dar es Salaam University College of Education 5PST - 3FGDs, 15 July 2022).

Teacher Educators and Pre-service Teachers' Perspectives on Transformative Curriculum

Participants reported that the university teacher education curriculum is standardised and does not integrate diverse teaching contexts, specifically rural teaching, as confirmed by one of the teacher educators.

In reality, our university curriculum does not integrate diverse teaching, specifically teaching in rural schools. the course outlines are standardised with pedagogies which do not allow flexibility of teaching in various contexts. Even during teaching practice, we are required to assess pre-service teachers on the basis of these curriculum standards and pedagogies. (Sokoine University of Agriculture - 3TE, 15 July 2022)

Participants' perspectives on a transformative curriculum focused on a neutral curriculum that integrates distinctive features for preparing pre-service teachers for rural teaching. These features should include inclusive and multiple knowledge that integrates pre-service teachers' experiences and beliefs in teacher education programs. Participants added that multiple knowledge curriculum creates flexibility in teaching in rural and urban schools, enabling pre-service teachers to link what is taught in the classroom with diverse real-life teaching environments. Commenting on this aspect, one of the teacher educators said, *"Teacher education should be concerned with orienting pre-service teachers to teach in both rural and urban schools and should be concerned with linking both contexts in theory and practice…"* (Dar es Salaam University College of Education - 5TE, 10 July 2022). Similarly, in the focus groups, one of the pre-service teachers insisted, *"Course outlines should be flexible to accommodate diverse contexts, to make us aware and conscious to teach in diverse contexts. This will enable us familiarise with the differences between rural and urban schools"*. (Sokoine University of Agriculture – 5PST- 1FGDs, 28 June 2022)

The participants suggested that a transformative curriculum should include special courses for rural teaching, integrating rural teaching in methods courses and teaching practice. They suggested flexibility of content to teach in diverse contexts, as well as creativity and problem-solving skills, which are essential topics for pre-service teachers to learn. Other topics include local resource improvisation, assessment focusing on diverse teaching, information and communication technology (ICT), and social-emotional learning. Regarding ICT, they suggested that the topic should be integrated with methodology courses. One teacher educator commented:

> Integrating technology and ICT with methodology courses will enable pre-service teachers to be creative. Methodology courses should train pre-service teachers to use their mobile phones to access materials for teaching, and facilities such as DVDs and tape recorders to store the teaching and learning materials. Using the storage devices, pre-service teachers may record lessons that can be used in teaching different groups of students, thus mitigating the problem of shortage of teachers and teaching larger classes. (Dar es Salaam University College of Education - 1TE, 11 June 2022)

Participants also revealed that social-emotional learning could prepare pre-service teachers to be resilient and emotionally well. Social-emotional learning will develop student-teachers' understanding and acceptance of the differences between teaching in urban and rural schools, develop flexibility and collaborative problem-solving skills. One of the teacher educators declared:

> Teacher education programs should prepare pre-service teachers to cope with teaching in rural schools by integrating social-emotional learning. Social emotional learning will enable them to develop socialisation and positive self-concepts, efficacy, awareness, accept differences, tolerance, flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving skills. (Dar es Salaam University College of Education - 3TE, 25 June 2022)

Perspectives on Transformative Classroom Pedagogies

Participants explained that interactive teaching methods could enable pre-service teachers to reflect and construct knowledge by assessing their experiences and prior knowledge. Moreover, teaching should be based on cooperative learning. In groups, pre-service teachers should be provided with integrated rural teaching problem-based cases, simulations, and scenarios to analyse them to provide solutions and alternatives. One of the study teacher educators provided the following views:

> Pre-service teachers should be exposed to group assignments linked with rural teaching problem-based cases in the form of video clips, descriptions, and written documents. They should analyse and provide alternatives and solutions for the teaching challenges in rural schools. In so doing, pre-service teachers will develop awareness of rural teaching knowledge, skills and attitudes such as creativity, problem-solving skills, confidence and others. (Dar es Salaam University College of Education - 1TE, 13 June 2022)

Discussion

This study examined how university teacher education prepares pre-service teachers for transforming rural teaching. The study examined pre-service teachers' and teacher educators' desire to transform rural teaching and their perspectives on transformative curriculum and pedagogy. The findings indicate that rural schools are geographically isolated and are associated with poverty, inadequate and under-qualified teachers teaching in overcrowded classes with limited teaching and learning resources. Participants reported that rural teachers are unable to fulfil their responsibilities, and they use inappropriate teaching instructions, which have implications on the quality of learning among rural students. These findings are in line with those reported by Raleigh and Coleman (2020), Hartman et al. (2022), Lian et al. (2023), Cheung (2021) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020). The latter suggests that geographical isolation and

resourcing deficits have led to rote learning and low-quality education in most rural schools worldwide. The low quality of education in rural schools has been an obstacle to meaningful learning and the development of higher-level learning skills among rural learners (Center for Public Education, 2023; Li et al., 2020). Subsequently, rural students have limited chance to join higher learning institutions, which has implications on their employment status and their participation in poverty reduction in rural areas (Tsoka et al., 2023; Cheung, 2021; Center for Public Education,2023).

Quality education in rural schools can be provided through social justice rather than tensing rural teachers for better performance and accountability in unfavourable teaching environments (Cuervo, 2012;2016). Social justice should recognise social context diversity, equal distribution of resources between rural and urban schools, and teachers' autonomy and participation in making decisions (Cuervo, 2012; Gaete et al., 2023; Gewirtz, 2006). Through social justice, in-service and pre-service teachers should understand the realities of teaching in rural schools' contexts (León et al., 2024). Teachers should understand how the quality of teaching in rural schools has affected the learning of rural learners and their future lives (Arsen et al., 2022; Center for Public Education, 2023; Brenner et al., 2022; Hartman et al., 2022; Lian et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2023). Teachers need to recognise that they have a primary responsibility and role in transforming the quality of teaching in rural schools (Riddle et al., 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2023; Tran et al., 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). As agents of change, rural teachers should be prepared and motivated to search for solutions to rural teaching challenges instead of resisting them (Boniface, 2019; Cheng et al., 2023; White, 2015). In line with the recognition of teachers as agents of change, there should be equal distribution of teaching resources, teachers' autonomy and participation in making decisions.

The study findings indicate that teacher educators and pre-service teachers are not willing to transform rural teaching, and they reported that it is the role of the government to improve teaching in rural schools. In addition, the participants revealed that the curriculum used in teacher education is standardised. This contradicts Tanzania Development Vision 2025 and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Summit report on developing teachers as agents of change and transformation in education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology Education, 2018; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023). Similar observations have been reported on educators' unwillingness to act as active agents for education transformation in rural schools due to, among other reasons, a lack of rural teaching consciousness and standardised curriculum (Nyoni, 2020; Riddle et al., 2023; Weinberg et al., 2020; White, 2015). In this study, the unwillingness of teacher educators and pre-service teachers to transform rural teaching may have resulted from inadequate consciousness of rural teaching and the standardised curriculum used in teacher education. Literature indicates that the successful development of transformation curiosity of rural teaching among teachers depends on teachers' awareness and understanding of rural context. (Alshumaimeri, 2022; Brenner et al., 2022; Reagan et al., 2019). In essence, Li et al. (2020) explain that teachers' understanding of rural schools' contexts, actual needs and internal features and functions prepare them to teach in rural schools. Pre-service teachers should be aware of teaching challenges and the opportunities in rural communities which can be used to change the quality of teaching in rural schools (Arinaitwe & Corbett, 2023; Boniface, 2019; Brenner et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2023; Nyoni, 2020; White, 2015). Raising awareness of what needs to be changed and the available opportunities in rural communities may empower pre-service teachers to develop transformation curiosity.

Regarding the reported standardised curriculum used in teacher education, similar findings indicate how standardised curriculum creates a dilemma among educators to view themselves as agents of change (Cheung, 2021; Lian et al., 2023; Nyoni, 2020; Riddle et al., 2023; Weinberg et al., 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023). The standardised curriculum hinders the achievement of diverse contexts' educational goals due to set standards (Annala, 2022; Robinson-Pant, 2023). The standardised curriculum does not prepare and support pre-service

teachers for transformation (Annala, 2022; Cheung, 2021; Lian et al., 2023; Quan et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023).

In this study, teacher educators and pre-service teachers' perspectives on transformative curriculum suggested a neutral curriculum that integrates diverse teaching contexts, ICT and social-emotional learning. Similar findings indicate the need for neutral curriculum to prepare pre-service teachers for transformation in education (Annala, 2022; Brenner et al., 2022; Lane & Waldron, 2021; Resch, 2020; Riddle et al., 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023; Weinberg et al., 2020). Neutral curriculum in teacher education reflects pre-service teachers' lived diverse experiences, including difficulties and challenges that contribute to their preparation for rural teaching (Riddle et al., 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2023). A curriculum that accommodates pre-service teachers' experiences related to rural communities develops their new frames of reference on a cognitive and social level (Resch, 2020; Riddle et al., 2023; Troop, 2017; Brenner et al., 2022; Robinson-Pant, 2023).

In order to develop transformation curiosity among pre-service teachers, teacher education programmes should accommodate pre-service teachers' community experiences. Accommodating pre-service teachers' community experiences prepares and provides them with relevant teaching practices and behaviours connected to their society (Resch, 2020; Riddle et al., 2023). In developing teaching behaviours connected to society, pre-service teachers should be equipped with social-emotional skills, as suggested by the participants of this study. Social-emotional skills equip pre-service teachers with behaviours in real-life teaching contexts (Leibowitz, 2017). As agents of change, social-emotional behaviours among pre-service teachers, such as resilience, collaboration, flexibility, acceptance of contexts differences, tolerance and commitment, enable them to search for solutions regarding rural teaching challenges (Boniface, 2019; Cheng et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023; White, 2015).

Participant perspectives on classroom pedagogy focused on pedagogy that develops higher-order skills among pre-service teachers. Participants commented on the importance of higher-order skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and ICT use during teaching and learning. Recent research has reported on the importance of higher-order learning skills in transforming rural teaching (Center for Public Education, 2023; Tsoka et al., 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Higher-order skills prepare pre-service teachers to be original thinkers, self-directed, and curious and develop the ability to find out and apply knowledge to solve various teaching problems (Song et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Higher-order skills can be developed through questioning, critical dialogues and reflections (Cui & Teo, 2023; Song et al., 2022; Troop, 2017; Underhill, 2021). Freire (1998) explains how critical pedagogy prepares pre-service teachers for societal transformational change through the connection between individual student experiences and society. Critical pedagogy and reflection of societal experiences connect pre-service teachers with social constructions of knowledge, dispositions, and actions for positivism and transformation (Omodan & Addam, 2022).

Participants' perspectives on classroom pedagogy comment on participatory classroom practices. Participants mentioned practices such as critical questioning, group tasks, and providing pre-service teachers with problem-based cases, simulations, and scenarios to analyse and solve the problems. The current findings are similar to those reported by Freire (1998), Mezirow (1997; 2000) and Underhill (2021) on the need for learner-centred practices in transforming learners. Other studies indicate how reflection and critical dialogue develop critical thinking and creativity and enable pre-service teachers to construct new appropriate rural teaching knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Singh, 2021; Song et al., 2022; Underhill, 2021).

Conclusions and Implications

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are made. Firstly, the quality of teaching in rural schools is related to geographical isolation, inadequate and under-qualified teachers, and a shortage of teaching and learning facilities in both regions. Secondly, teacher education does not prepare pre-service teachers to teach in rural schools due to the standardised curriculum used in teacher education. Thirdly, many teacher educators and pre-service teachers are not open to transform rural teaching. This may have resulted from applying the existing standardised university curriculum. Fourthly, to develop pre-service teachers' desire to change rural teaching, there is a need for transformative learning in university teacher education. The transformative curriculum should consider social justice and should include diverse knowledge of teaching in both rural and urban schools and should be implemented through classroom critical pedagogy and reflection.

The findings of this study have implications on the need for transformation of rural teaching in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Since transformation in education starts with teachers (Tran et al., 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023; Wang et al., 2023), teacher education should prepare teachers for transformation. Teacher education should empower pre-service teachers to become active agents of change by developing awareness and understanding of complex and diverse teaching realities. Teacher education should equip pre-service teachers with transformation curiosity through a transformative curriculum (Riddle et al., 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2023) and pedagogy (Riddle et al., 2023; Robinson-Pant, 2023; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018). The present study contributes to the existing knowledge by providing insights about how teacher education programmes should develop pre-service teachers' transformation curiosity through transformative curriculum and classroom pedagogy. The insights can be used as guides for equipping pre-service teachers with knowledge, higher order learning skills, social and emotional skills necessary for transformation of rural teaching. Based on the findings of the study, further studies can be conducted on professional development to equip teacher educators with transformation experiences. Experimental and longitudinal studies on the same topic are highly recommended.

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Attractive Rural Schools in Czechia: Different Patterns of Strategies in the Market

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Abstract

Current policies in education that support school choice can be a threat but also an opportunity for rural schools that are often at risk of closure or amalgamation/consolidation. Studies from Western Europe found two types of schools using the 'capitals' of the rural environment in different ways: 'community' and 'magnet' schools. Our mixed-methods study enriches the discussion on successful rural schools, considering both the school leadership strategies and the situation in the local quasi-market of schools in a post-socialist central European country, Czechia. In the first step, using data from all Czech rural elementary schools, we identified schools that were in demand by local and out-of-catchment-area students. We performed a detailed qualitative analysis of 13 selected case schools and their local quasi-markets in the second step. The usefulness of the analytical distinction between rural schools oriented towards the needs of the local community and those that use rural capital to meet the needs of liberal middle-class families is demonstrated. At the same time, there is a group of rural schools that try to balance the interests of both groups. The article presents vignettes of three such schools. The key feature of these 'catch-all' schools is negotiated innovation (i.e., sustainable change communicated with local actors and enabling the coexistence of tradition and innovation). Our study provides a deeper insight into the community/magnet typology, building on the perspective of a different part of Europe. It brings important insights for educational policy and the leadership of rural schools.

Keywords: rural schools, rurality, school choice, local school market, Czechia, mixed-methods approach

Introduction

School choice is a phenomenon associated mainly with the urban environment. It may even be seen as a "rural school killer" (Carlson, 2022). Current policies in education that support school choice can be a threat but also an opportunity for rural schools, but there is relatively little knowledge about how rural schools use market mechanisms to maintain their existence and

development. Based on research in Spain and Sweden, Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020) described two analytical types of rural school responses to quasi-markets in education. In our article, we use this typology for the analysis of rural schooling in Czechia, where there is a post-socialist education system in which a radical decentralisation of the education system took place (Kučerová et al., 2020) and neoliberal market mechanisms were applied in school administration. Based on a mixed-methods analysis of attractive rural schools, we discuss and elaborate on the relevance of the Beach and Vigo Arrazola typology to the Czech educational market.

Review of Literature

Rural schools are permanently under threat of closure or amalgamation/consolidation, which brings risks not only for staff or students (Nitta et al., 2010) but also for wider communities. Schools, therefore, compete for students. The increasing marketisation is connected with other processes taking place in education—the strengthening of the autonomy and profiling of schools, the transition from a hierarchical to a heterarchical organisation with several different actors participating in the provision and management of education, privatisation, and the emergence of the so-called new charity, in which pious goals when establishing new or restructuring existing schools become a tool for building the image of commercial companies or directly a new opportunity for generating profit (Ball, 2008; van Zanten, 2005).

Proponents of market principles in education worldwide rely to varying degrees on two main mechanisms (Hess, 2009)—school choice and greater diversity of school founders.

Strengthening the right of parents to choose from within the existing state/municipal schools forces schools to compete and to behave more like business entities. In this area, the Czech state, during the post-socialist transformation, removed administrative obstacles to choosing a school but also heavily subsidised students' public transport fares, which helped families overcome economic barriers of choice.

Support for non-state founders attracts new actors to the education sector (i.e., new human and financial resources). In Czechia, the policy of the communist regime, which did not allow schools other than those founded and operated by the state, was completely abandoned. The emergence of non-state schools was mainly an urban phenomenon in the first decades of the post-socialist transformation. In recent years private and church primary schools have also appeared in the countryside (Meyer & Kučerová, 2023). In our research, we therefore focus primarily on the first mechanism—the behaviour of competing public (municipal) schools.

Studies of the effects of school choice conducted in a rural or 'non-suburban' environment (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015; Edwards, 2021; Gulosino & Liebert, 2020) are mainly related to the demand side. Generally, pull and push factors involved in family decision-making are often distinguished (Maroulis et al., 2019; Passmore, 2021). In a rural environment, these factors can be understood primarily in relation to commuting students (both incoming to and outgoing from the school/village under study) and then refer either to their original catchment area school (push) or to the school that is currently attended (pull). In Mitchelson et al. (2021), special educators use a different conceptualisation: pull factors 'keep' the students in their current school; push factors drive them out of it. Push and pull factors are closely linked by the distinction between reactive choice, a form of escape for students from an environment perceived as unfavourable, and strategic choice, primarily a search for better education. However, push/pull factors such as reactive and strategic choice are, to some extent, present in every choice.

Few studies have examined how schools respond to parents' preferences and strategies (Potterton et al., 2020; Savage, 2012; van Zanten, 2009). In many countries, decentralisation leads schools to create specific programmes and profiles in the quasi-market conditions. In the Chilean educational market (Chile is a country that has applied a neoliberal model very consistently in education), Zancajo (2020) found five domains of school behaviour: market scanning,

promotional activities such as advertising and public relations, change of school policies and practices, improvement of academic performance and influencing the socio-economic or ethnic composition of a school's student body.

Although we are interested in differences in the behaviour of rural schools, most of them share some structural characteristics (e.g., a lower total number of students and small class groups) and location and external environmental characteristics (locations in a green environment). Also, such schools act within social patterns typical of a rural way of life—for example with close relationships and informal social control (Gristy et al., 2020). Svoboda et al. (2022) described how Czech rural schools use such perceived advantages of rural areas to retain and acquire students. Kučerová et al. (2015) studied the impact of the marketisation of education on rural communities.

Using the critical meta-ethnography of quasi-markets in education in Spain and Sweden, Beach and Vigo Arrazola (2020) concluded that school choice can often lead to the creation of 'magnet' rural schools. These schools take advantage of the increasing mobility of certain groups of students, and more than half of their students come from outside their catchment area (zone). If we only look at the pedagogical processes or the educational results inside the magnet school, these schools can often boast positive signs. However, they do not fulfil other social functions for the rural communities in which they are located. In terms of the existence of schools in other nearby rural communities, they can have a significantly negative impact. The authors also describe the second type, which they call 'community' rural school. Community schools' approach towards local society can be contrasted with that of magnet schools. Community schools recruit mostly local students. Although these schools may not guarantee top academic results, they bring other benefits to students. They are also a significant part of the life of local communities and contribute to their development beyond the increase of real estate prices in the village (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020).

Context

In Czechia, compulsory education is usually provided in comprehensive elementary schools called 'basic school' (základní škola). Most basic schools are founded and operated by municipalities, and 97% of all comprehensive school students attend municipal schools. The share of private and church basic schools is less than 5%, but several new non-state schools have been established in recent years. Compulsory education lasts nine years, but the grade span of individual schools varies. Two-thirds of municipal basic schools are 'complete' schools (the grade span 1–9, combining both primary and lower secondary school), but rural schools are often 'incomplete' schools (only some or all primary school grades). Since 2017, one year of pre-school (pre-primary) education has been compulsory. It is usually provided in nurseries/kindergartens, which are independent in principle but, in practice, may be connected to a primary school. Although the share of incomplete schools is significant, the number of students in them is small (7%). The so-called multi-year selective grammar schools in towns and cities also provide lower secondary education. Some students also receive compulsory education in schools or classes for children with special educational needs or are home-schooled (Kostelecká et al., 2021); our study did not include these.

After the fall of the communist regime, a strictly planned system of catchment areas (zones) was replaced by an opt-out approach: each child has a guarantee of admission at the comprehensive municipal elementary school assigned to the catchment area of the student's place of permanent residence unless the child's guardian chooses another school (Section 36(5) of Act No. 561/2004). Czech parents increasingly use school choice, which has lost its elite aspect and is no longer limited to the middle class (Straková & Simonová, 2015). It was only in 2023, as a result of a combination of demographic conditions, the influx of war refugees from Ukraine (often families with school-age children), and growing differences between individual schools (in terms of ethnic composition, achievement, and attainment), that the partial collapse of the very liberal system of

compulsory schooling led to a more vocal discussion about stricter regulation of catchment areas (Meyer & Kučerová, 2023).

A relatively dense network of (small) municipalities, many of which maintain their own primary and often also lower (junior) secondary schools, provides for educational options in some rural parts of Czechia. Czech parents primarily choose schools that, in their opinion, can ensure the well-being of their children (Svoboda et al., 2022), a kind environment and friendly teachers or the teachers' willingness and ability to consider students' individual needs are most appreciated (Simonová, 2017). The unavailability of standardised data on the academic performance of schools in Czechia may play a role in the preference for 'soft' characteristics, too, as there is extensive evidence from other educational systems (including large-scale field experiments) that the availability of academic performance data leads families to prefer higher achieving schools (e.g. Houston & Henig, 2023; Valant & Weixler, 2022), although parents usually also consider other school traits and differences in preferences exist between different subgroups (Beuermann et al., 2023; Mandinach et al., 2020).

Research Questions

Our work examines in-demand Czech schools in rural areas within various geographical contexts that feature different development strategies of school leadership. Our research questions include the following:

1. Are there some rural Czech schools that simultaneously have a relatively high proportion of out-of-catchment-area students as well as the high loyalty of local students?
2. What do these rural in-demand schools look like, and what developmental trajectories do they follow?
3. What structural factors and leadership strategies contribute to the attractiveness of these schools for various groups of families?
4. To what extent does the analytical distinction between community and magnet schools (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020) contribute to the understanding of the strategies of Czech rural schools?

Data and Methods

In our study, we defined rural municipalities using a context-oriented approach applying quantitative criteria. A rural municipality has no more than one municipal school within its territory and a population of less than 3000 inhabitants (following the definition of a 'non-urban settlement' in the Czech legislation). A rural school is a school in such a municipality. In 2019, there were 2086 such rural schools in Czechia (about half of all compulsory basic schools).

Selection of Case Schools

A mixed-methods approach was used in the research. We assumed that an in-demand school has a high-capacity utilisation and simultaneously admits many students from beyond its catchment area. Register data on all Czech schools was used; it included school capacity, the total number of students, and information on newly admitted students in the previous three years (broken down by place of residence). First, 192 in-demand rural schools were selected using the following indicators:

- the highest quartile of the school capacity utilisation ratio (over 77.1%)
- the highest quartile of the share of students from outside the catchment area registered for the enrolment process (over 21.9%).

Figure 1: *Out-of-catchment-Area Applications in all Czech Rural Schools (N=2086) and Selected Cases (red dots, n=13)*
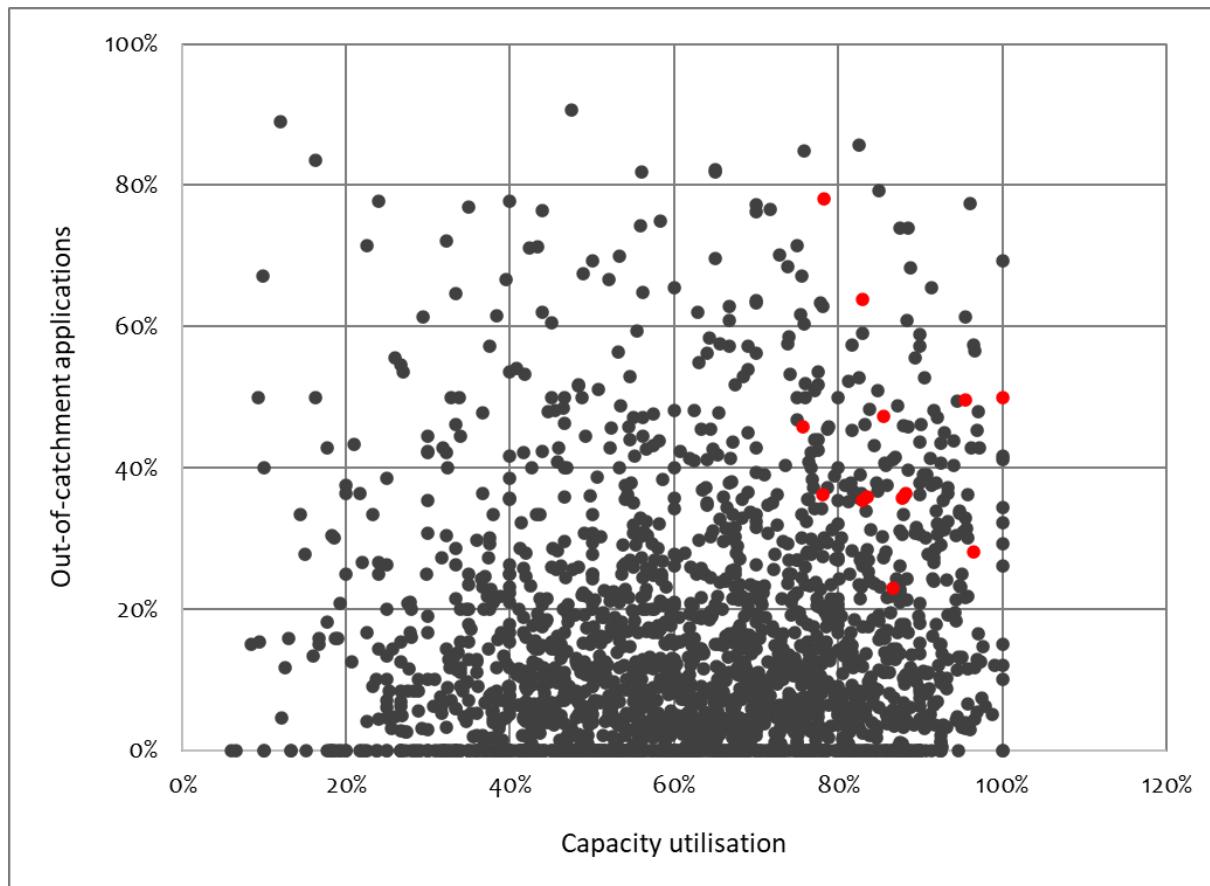
Note: Statistical data about the schools refers to 2019, the year before the changes connected with the COVID-19 pandemic (if not defined otherwise). Students from outside the catchment area = average percentage of students for the school's enrolment process whose permanent address is outside the catchment area (average from the years 2017–2019).

Of these, we excluded the smallest schools, as their data was too strongly influenced by random fluctuation. The second selection step aimed to cover the variability of situations related to the demand for the schools in terms of both their internal characteristics and the external setting and environment. Thus, on the one hand, the socio-geographic data on the municipality and school location was analysed (see Kučerová et al., 2022), and on the other, the schools' online presentations and other documents were considered. To perform an intensive examination of the various situations of in-demand rural schools, we selected 13 case schools covering the set's variability to the greatest possible extent (Figure 1). All the selected schools agreed to participate in the research. However, we found that we had to analyse the primary and lower secondary levels separately. For the same reason, we excluded two primary-only schools from further analysis in this study.

Case Data Collection and Analysis

Since there is a logical trade-off between the share of local students and the share of out-of-catchment-area students in each school, we used a pair of mutually independent characteristics for the case schools. First, we calculated the total share of case school students commuting from other catchment areas. In the previous step of the selection process, we used a slightly different indicator: the share of out-of-catchment-area student applications for Grade 1. Such an indicator was available for all Czech schools but only for the three previous school years. Then, we determined the proportion of all school-age children from a given municipality (catchment area)

attending the case school, i.e., the school in their home municipality (Figure 2). In other words, we were interested in the proportion of local families choosing a non-local school. We did not include students enrolled in selective grammar schools.

Next, the qualitative case data collection included an anonymous non-standardised questionnaire for the parents of the schools' students regarding their school choice preferences and interviews with school principals, Mayors of municipalities, and parents who volunteered to provide their contact details in the questionnaire.

In order to achieve comparability of the cases, we used a pre-structured multiple-case study. Individual cases were anonymised through letter codes and described within the same pre-selected structure. The structure comprised five areas based on five categories identified by Simonová (2017, p. 146) as essential for a school to be assessed as of high quality by Czech parents:

1. the school's position (both geographical location and status)
2. its leadership, instructional resources, and processes
3. after-school care and catering,
4. the quality of the student's life (the physical and social environment and individualisation), and
5. having influence (communication with parents and their participation in school life).

We assumed that if parents seek these characteristics, the schools will address them in their public image as conveyed by the principal, Mayor, and the school's web pages. The most illustrative statements were selected as direct citations to support the descriptions provided in the case vignettes. For the purposes of this study, we present only vignettes illustrating the relationship between the types of magnet and community schools selected from more comprehensive case studies.

Ethics approval was granted by the independent ethics committee of the Faculty of Science at J. E. Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem. In the quantitative part of the study, we worked with data aggregated according to schools and municipalities of residence, which did not contain any student identifiers. The qualitative case data included only adults who provided informed consent. The data was stored and processed following the approved project and standard rules of educational research.

Results

First, we present the quantitative relationships between the case school population and the locals attending surrounding (competing) schools. Then, we qualitatively describe three cases of schools that fall between the poles of community and magnet schools.

In Figure 2, each school is characterised by two points corresponding to the composition of students at primary and lower secondary levels. For three schools, the primary and secondary compositions appear quite different (D, F, K—points connected by a dashed line in Figure 2). We believe that structural reasons play a significant role in family decision-making and possibly also different de facto catchment areas for both levels, not the school leadership policy. We do not consider these three schools below, although they represent an interesting challenge for further analysis.

With most out-of-catchment-area students, the B school has the features of a 'magnet' school. Unlike most schools in our group, it has just average (somewhat worn) premises and equipment.

Figure 2: *Quantitative Analysis of Local School Markets (The Connected Pair of Dots Correspond to the Primary and Lower Secondary Level of a Case School)*
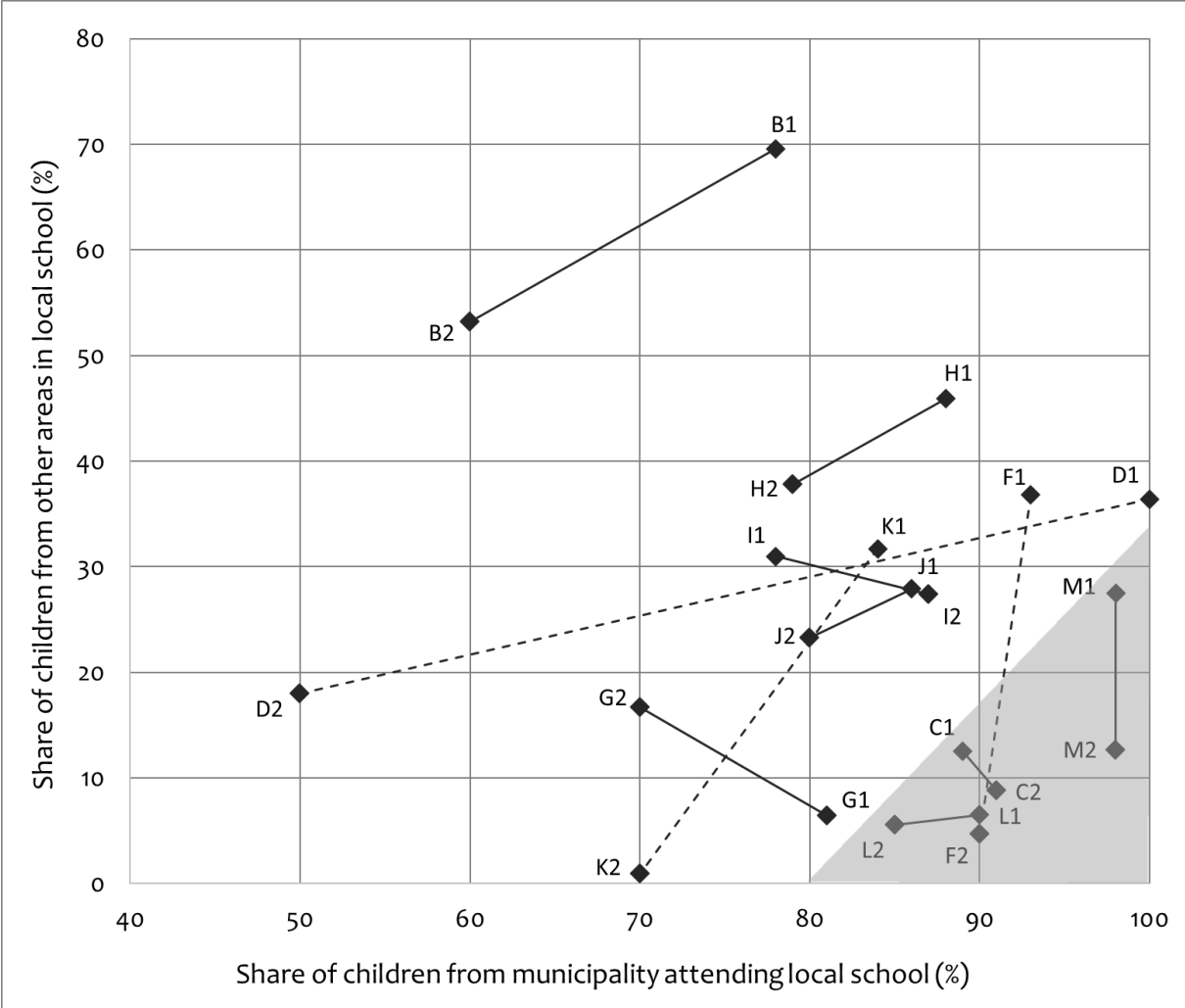
However, it offers radical innovative and alternative pedagogies emphasising subjective well-being and a maximally individualised approach to students, which appeals to middle-class families from a wide region, including the nearby towns. As the quantitative data shows, it has by far the highest proportion of out-of-catchment-area students among the case schools, but at the same time, many local families enrol their children in other schools. However, the resulting numerical balance is still favourable from the point of view of the Mayor, as the absolute number of out-of-catchment-area students is higher than the number of outgoing locals, and the school is economically sustainable (for more details, see Svoboda et al., 2022).

The other 'community' pole is represented by schools that mainly serve the local municipality, which is satisfied with them (the grey triangle in the lower right corner—C, L, M). Only a minimal number of local children go elsewhere, but the school is also attractive to a modest share of out-of-catchment-area students. A more detailed analysis shows that the reason for this attractiveness is sometimes the push factor in the first place: the structural reason is the effort of out-of-catchment-area families to avoid small primary-only schools (parents want to minimise the number of future structural transitions in the educational path), or families are avoiding a school with a high proportion of Roma students (white flight). In the case of push factors, the target school can be a 'good enough school' (James & Oplatka, 2015). These schools generally have above-average material conditions and equipment. They are reasonably innovative and keep

communication with parents open, but they do not launch bold pedagogical experiments nor employ alternative approaches, and especially the smaller ones are closely connected with the local community.

However, the remaining four schools in our group (G, H, I, J) lie between the two poles. Three of them that illustrate the different development trajectories of the schools are presented in the following vignettes.

Serving the Community and Beyond (J)

School J is located in a rather economically weak region with a fragmented settlement pattern. The municipality is the centre of its microregion and the seat of a large agricultural company. A key structural advantage is good transport accessibility from the nearby town, both by public transport and now also by private car: *"We have already built a second car park next to the school. Before there was heavy traffic here on the road, yes, and in the middle of the traffic the children were jumping out of cars there."* (Mayor) Among the structural reasons, the parents also mention the school's wide grade span (including the availability of nursery classes), minimising the need for transitions, *"So we actually already enrolled our son in the nursery with the understanding that later he will eventually go to [primary] school here."* (Parent)

Some local parents, as well as the Mayor, value the above-average physical environment of the school the most: *"I appreciate the fact that they actually invest a lot of money, both in the nursery and in the school, we can see that on the premises and I like that"* (Parent), but they are just as satisfied with the way the leadership and staff communicate with parents and students. Various innovative and alternative pedagogic models are used somewhat eclectically, but their implementation is based on consultations with the community. When the school abolished grades in Years 1 and 2, it held a poll that showed that parents preferred traditional grading, and the principal modified the school's policy. Nevertheless, the assessment has not fully returned to the traditional model, and the grades are accompanied by detailed formative feedback to the students (which is not standard in Czech schools). Good relations and mutual trust between the leadership, parents, and students proved to be very important during the COVID-19 pandemic. *"I am really happy with the teachers and the instruction. The distance learning was an acid test, and it went simply flawlessly, [both with teachers and] also with the classmates"* (Parent). An example of the specific advantage of a rural location is the low-cost heating of the school with biogas produced by a local agricultural company, which dramatically reduces the school's operating costs and allows it to invest in the development of the building and equipment.

This provides for a wide range of extracurricular activities that capitalise on the superior promises. Czech schools traditionally start classes at eight in the morning, and compulsory lessons end soon after noon. At the same time, a high proportion of women are employed. That's why after-school care is so important. Families of students who commute by public transit know that their children are in a safe environment because the school is open to all students until late in the afternoon: *"There is no chance for them to wander around. Until their public transport bus leaves, they are here with us."* (Principal). Parents also positively perceive that leisure activities are comprehensively planned, and the parent does not have to be present or accompany the student when moving from one activity to another. However, the school facilities are also available to the village residents. *"Everything is there, yes, you can come there if you want to play tennis in the afternoon, so you just need to book in advance"* (Mayor). In such a way, the school keeps the social life of the village going as a community centre, making its facilities available to both minors and adults in the afternoon. *"Here, most of the events in the village are related to the school, school prom, academy, fairs, this year a sports day for parents. It's just [that] the school is trying to give everything back to the village."* (Principal)

The school is, therefore, very similar to community-oriented schools, but it is also attractive to a share of urban families who want to avoid large and perhaps lower-quality schools in the town:

"*I just didn't want them to go to the [town school].*" Parents sometimes define themselves not in relation to the current situation but in relation to their own past experience, which they project onto the town schools (cf. Smith Slámová, 2021): "*I actually went to the [town school] and for me that school was big, chaotic.*" A rural school with less anonymous interpersonal relationships is valued for its 'family approach' and for being an all-day safe space, even for the children who commute.

Community School in the Making (G)

Identifying itself as a 'modern rural', School G is located in an ordinary (non-profiled) rural region near a smaller town. Today, the school is housed in a renovated building in a quiet part of the village, off the main thoroughfare. The school premises also include the school arboretum, a geopark, and a sports field.

The turnaround in the history of the school started in 2011 when the school faced a significant decline in its student numbers. Many local children from the catchment area left for other schools. The Mayor recalls: "*It was because of local patriotism that I was sorry. When the school is here... why would they go somewhere else? It bothered me terribly.*" The school has been perceived as an integral element of the local community: "*Almost every parent from the village has gone through this school.*" Poor communication between staff, parents, and students and an overall unfavourable school climate, old-fashioned teaching, and inadequate school facilities were identified as the main causes of these departures.

In the first years after taking office, the new school leadership was strongly oriented towards stopping the outflow of locals. The municipality supported plans for the overall redevelopment of the school building and providing a well-equipped learning environment and a safe school climate:

> *Perfect environs, the new building, an individual approach. It is really a village school, but still seems to have a really high standard of teaching. So it's not just about the new building, albeit it actually improved a lot, made the job easier for the teachers, it's really about the teachers and the quality of the teachers. (Local parent)*

The principal has an above-average education (two master's degrees and a PhD.), is involved in municipal politics (e.g., as vice-mayor), his priorities include sustainable rural development (agriculture, hunting). The division of roles between him and his deputy principal works: the principal focuses mainly on improving premises, equipment and in the field of human resources, while his deputy is more focused on instructional leadership. The principal is also an alumnus and perceives the importance of turning the school into a centre of social life in the village: "*And I'm glad that the school lives even after the last bell rings.*" The range of extracurricular activities organised by both the staff and external partners was gradually expanded. Parents appreciate that village children need not commute to the nearby town to take part in leisure and interest activities and that the school plays a significant role in the community's social life.

Such changes did not go unnoticed in the surrounding villages or in the nearest town. Gradually, the share of out-of-catchment-area students began to rise. Town parents appreciate the closeness to nature capitalised on by the school's many activities in the field of environmental education (pull factor) and good public transit connectivity. Also, some out-of-catchment-area families do not perceive their local schools as being of high quality or safe (push factors).

As we mentioned above, the absence of 'hard' achievement data is typical for Czech education, so other indicators play a big role. This is also true in this case: "*[School leadership] was very successful in renewing and rejuvenating the staff. I think it also affects the parents, it can't be a bad school if young people come to teach here*" (Mayor).

The generational change of the staff led to some curriculum innovations, such as the widespread use of ICT in teaching or typing/keyboard skills becoming a compulsory subject. This was met with

disapproval by some local parents and needed to be communicated and negotiated repeatedly. Similarly, trying to create a safer climate with zero tolerance for aggressive behaviour faced resistance as some families considered fighting to be part of the 'traditional' way of solving conflicts between boys in the countryside. However, the school leadership does not want to revoke its policy in this area. Thus, even now, some local children enlist in other schools in nearby towns or transfer to them. Compared to the previous case, this school promotes innovation more directly, and its position between the magnet/community poles may evolve further.

A School for two Different Communities (H)

The tension between orientation to the local community and the need to recruit out-of-catchment-area students was solved by School H by establishing two different primary tracks (or streams) with different curricula. The school is located in a village approximately a ten-minute drive from the regional capital of an economically successful region connected to the main transport lines across Czechia. Its pavilion-style building is currently undergoing costly renovation and includes spaces for outdoor learning, a school garden, and a sports field. The actual occupancy is over 90% of its capacity of 490 students. For most local parents, the school is the preferred choice. However, some families choose schools in the nearby city. These parents commute to work in the city and drive their children to urban schools or choose one of the specialised city schools (schools with extra sports, arts, or foreign language classes).

At the same time, the school is in high demand from out-of-catchment-area families, mainly city parents (around 100 students) or families from the surrounding villages and, rarely, also parents living beyond the usual driving distance who are willing to transport their children individually. The key reason is that there are two classes in each primary year, one of them providing an alternative educational programme of Montessori pedagogy.

Progressive and alternative instruction is attractive to parents with higher education from the regional centre, who attach great importance to the choice of school. "*Before my daughter went to first grade, I worried about where my child would go to school for about three years.*" (Parent 1) So (another) community is being created around the school—not local, but urban parents, who support only one part of the school: "*I trusted that at the Montessori primary I would meet people who are similarly minded and who somehow agree with my priorities. We founded a civic association to support the development of the Montessori part of the school.*" (Parent 1)

However, the school strives to improve teaching in other classes as well, e.g., by an emphasis on sustainability and multicultural education or the personal and social growth of students. Continuing professional development of the teaching staff includes networking with other similarly oriented schools on a regional scale. The individual approach to students and parents and the style of communication with them ('open door policy', according to the principal), is highly valued. "*When there is a problem, the leadership always gets involved, we always got together—all the teachers from the class, the child, the parents, the leadership, and we always talked about everything. Which I think is excellent.*" (Parent 2) This school, like the previous two cases, also offers a wide range of extracurricular and leisure after-school activities.

Some out-of-catchment-area families even cheat to get a place at this attractive school (a phenomenon called "catchment area/enrolment tourism" in Czechia—Meyer & Kučerová, 2023), but the reputation of the school has become a reason for a genuine migration to the village, too:

> Parents told me that they bought a building plot or a house here because they wanted our school [for their children], and they wanted them to be in the catchment area so that they could definitely get in here. It was worth it for them to spend an outrageous amount of money and move here. (Principal).

This is unusual in the context of the low mobility of the population of Czechia—unlike many countries of the Global West (e.g., Butler & van Zanten, 2007).

Discussion

This study investigated whether the concepts of 'community' and 'magnet' schools (Beach & Vigo Arrazola, 2020) can be applied in the post-socialist context of central Europe. Our results show that in Czechia, too, the rural school development strategies described in the Western context are at work. An important contribution of our study is that we describe cases of 'catch-all' schools that successfully combine both strategies. Indeed, our original procedure for selecting schools was set up to be sensitive to cases different from their typology. We were interested in rural schools that are the preferred choice of the families from the local community and at the same time have out-of-catchment-area students. As a result, with one exception, we deliberately did not study rural 'magnet' schools that are mainly oriented towards students from outside the catchment area and have a low proportion of local students. In this study, we also do not deal with successful schools with a high share of the local student population, where the presence of out-of-catchment-area children is sometimes more likely to be due to push factors (dysfunctional schools in nearby municipalities), structural factors (geography), or just serendipity. For the prototypical magnet and community schools, a detailed analysis has been provided elsewhere, as described by Svoboda et al. (2022).

With some simplification, it can be said that some Czech rural schools need to be, and try to be, 'community' and 'magnet' schools at the same time. The key reason is that many small municipalities try to maintain not only primary but also junior secondary classes in their schools. A secondary school, however, is obviously a much more demanding undertaking. For example, the Czech school law allows multi-grade teaching to be organised at the primary level (Grades 1-5), but not at the junior secondary level (Grades 6-9). In other words, a primary school can be reduced to, for example, a situation where it has just a principal and one or two teachers, but a Czech secondary school cannot legally use a multi-grade model. As one of the Mayors stated, the Czech countryside in the 2010s benefited from European structural policies and decent economic growth, and municipalities often financed large-scale renovations of school buildings and modernisation of their equipment. However, the central government covers the schools' operating costs based on the number of enrolled students (Shewbridge et al., 2016). In such a case, the rural municipality not only had to ensure the investment in the school building but also often contributed to the operating costs.

In some countries, it is standard to have a separate primary school and then a combined lower and upper secondary school, and elsewhere (the post-Soviet area, northern Europe and in parts of the Mediterranean), combined schools prevail, but in the rural areas there are also many primary-only schools. In Czech conditions, some parents want their child to go to a 'combined' (i.e. long grade-span) school from the start, which may discourage them from choosing a small rural school. If a Czech rural school does not want to be disadvantaged in its competition with urban schools, it may be an advantage to have a full grade span, and for that, it often needs out-of-catchment-area students. If such children come to a rural school from urban families, this would not have a direct negative impact on neighbouring municipalities and their schools. However, the high rate of commuters helps some schools maintain a wider grade span (both primary and lower secondary classes), and this can then become a structural advantage compared to municipalities where there is a primary-only or multi-grade school.

As we mentioned above, in Czechia, there is no publicly available and reliable data on the results of students for individual schools, nor is there data on their socio-economic composition. In this situation, many parents (and more so the less educated ones) choose a rural school based on the appearance and equipment of the school buildings (case J). Urban families, on the other hand, may prefer the well-being of their offspring and look for small rural schools and classes for their children (especially if their child is somehow vulnerable). Today, some rural schools can offer both

and more without resorting to aggressive marketing and are indeed being chosen by both local and non-catchment-area parents.

The leadership of many schools must thus walk a tightrope and try to fulfil their ethical obligations towards the local community, gradually innovate education, and simultaneously maximise the number of students in the school (case G). The preferences and values of local and non-catchment-area families can come into conflict. Urban families (or progressive school staff) could try to 'hijack' the rural school and steer it according to their values. On the contrary, local parents can inhibit and reject beneficial innovations.

The successful 'catch-all' schools we describe above introduced innovations but, at the same time, maintained more traditional approaches. Old and new coexist in them, either as alternatives (traditional and alternative classes) or as complementary approaches (simultaneous formative assessment and traditional marking). Such a school seems to act according to the passage from the Gospel, according to which a good steward *bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old*" (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Matthew 13:52). Reflexively combining the old and the new is a strategy that has proven itself not only in schooling but also in other domains when striving for sustainable development in rural areas (Zagata et al., 2020). Of course, when introducing changes, schools considered other factors supporting the success and sustainability of innovations—especially open communication with local actors, collaboration within and beyond the school, and sensitivity to resistance (e.g., Prenger et al., 2022; Sánchez & Gutiérrez-Esteban, 2023)

School H illustrates a specific strategy to avoid a trade-off between the demands and values of local and urban students. Like magnet schools, it attracts middle-class families from the nearby city using alternative (Montessori) pedagogy. Thanks to the traditional system of looping (the composition of the classes remains essentially the same throughout the entire period of attendance at the given school), it is easy to maintain one stable group of children in the mainstream pedagogy track and the other in the alternative track within a comprehensive school, and parents can choose (at least theoretically) which approach suits them for their children. There are, de facto, two primary schools within one organisation—one more oriented towards the local community and the other for highly mobile parents from a relatively close university city.

Limitations

In the international literature, rural schools are often defined as being small, both in terms of their enrolment and staff numbers (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022), but also as multi-grade schools, i.e. schools where there are students of several grades in one class, usually taught by one teacher (Fickermann et al., 1998). We excluded the smallest schools because, for them, the quantitative identifiers used in the selection of schools fluctuated too randomly over time. This left one important group of rural schools out of our study. The students at rural schools were not given a voice in our study, either. We have made certain simplifications in our analysis. In the first step of our analysis, we use the number of students admitted who were labelled as from an out-of-catchment-area by the principal. In the detailed case analysis, we refer to students living in a municipality with at least one concurrent school as an out-of-catchment-area. As a result, we do not yet count students who live in villages where there is no school at all and who are enrolled elsewhere. More precise analysis would require the knowledge of official catchment areas according to municipal ordinances, which do not exist in all cases.

The generalisability of our conclusions may also be limited by the specific structural characteristics of the Czech countryside, where there is a high density of small municipalities (Kučerová et al., 2020). As a result, even in the countryside, the spatial dimensions of many catchment areas and driving distances are relatively small. Only in rare cases do school buses exist in the sense that they are known, for example, from the USA.

Conclusion

Schools in the post-socialist countries of central Europe, which previously had strictly defined catchment areas (zones), now work in what is very much a market environment. The choice of school is increasingly used by rural families as well. The two contrasting types or patterns of the behaviour of rural schools on the educational market proposed by Beach & Vigo Arrazola (2020) prove to be valid for the Czech environment. We suggest the possibility of understanding both types as the poles of a continuum, i.e., as one dimension, which can be captured by the share of out-of-catchment-area students in a rural school, especially students from towns/cities. In our analysis, we added a second dimension expressed by the share of catchment-area students who choose a school other than the local one. It is also necessary to account for the structural factors of both geography and the organisation of education—legislative and budgetary rules for schools. 'Combined' Czech rural schools often need to be 'community' and 'magnet' schools at the same time. In doing this, leaders walk the tightrope between the efforts to innovate instruction (not only to attract the urban students) and meet the—sometimes conservative—expectations of locals. If successful, confronting the values and experiences of different groups of parents and searching for compromises can lead to mutual enrichment and sustainable development of rural schools.

Acknowledgement

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A *Blueprint for Rural Mathematics*: Connecting Social Space, Identity and Teacher Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper reports on the development and use of a *Blueprint for Rural Mathematics* (herein referred to as the *Blueprint*) in a study of middle-primary mathematics teaching. The study presented a counter-narrative to the deficit discourse around rural education outcomes through an emic perspective of middle-primary mathematics on the Yorke Peninsula, a rural district in southern Australia. This study defined 'rural' as a sociological and geographical phenomenon. It takes a sociological stance acknowledging the situatedness of the rural and the social and cultural uniqueness of the people and their communities. Geographically, the rural locations in this study were those distanced from, and outside the commuting zone of, large urban areas and major cities. This study claimed that rural schools of Yorke Peninsula are unresearched, under-theorised and underestimated in their teaching of mathematics. Hence, very little was known about the experiences of the Yorke Peninsula teachers or the pedagogical practices they employed in their mathematics teaching. Yorke Peninsula people have an identity of deficit imposed on them with no opportunity to negotiate it. In understanding and addressing the accuracy of this pervasive negative framing, this study investigated Yorke Peninsula teachers of mathematics. It concluded that the rural social space, the identity of its members, and teacher pedagogy are essential considerations in mathematics teaching. The *Blueprint* provides a framework to explore these key components of rural education.

**Keywords:** *Rural; mathematics; social space; identity; teacher pedagogy*

Introduction

Rural students worldwide, including in Australia, are consistently reported from a deficit discourse and as achieving English and Mathematics outcomes lower than their urban counterparts according to standardised assessment results (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2019; Thomson et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2021). Rural research has typically ignored the issue of the metrocentric urban approach (Corbett, 2015), an approach which does not consult with rural people, nor acknowledge the specific strengths and needs of the rural learner and community. A substantial amount of mathematics education research has used the

mathematics achievement gap as a lens to compare differing groups of students. Doing so, Gutiérrez (2008) believes, perpetuates negative deficit narratives, normalises low achievement of specific groups and their comparison to others, fails to recognise that low scores on standardised tests mirror discrepancies in opportunities and life chances of students from different backgrounds, and ignores the identities of students. Framing rural learners from a negative stance ignores their identity and context. This framing of the rural learner is from a narrow view—from data gathered about them rather than from asking the rural people themselves. An alternate approach going forward requires educational governance with a focus on "*enhancing local voice and agency, while enlarging democratic power*" (Howard et al., 2020, p. 2). This alternative requires a focus on equity (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2017). With a dominance of mathematics education research into issues of access and achievement, Gutiérrez (2008) calls for researching issues of identity and power as there is little recognition of the linguistic and cultural resources that marginalised students bring to the classroom and to the discipline of mathematics. These recommendations for rural research to engage the identity and voice of rural people within an equity frame influenced the direction of this study.

This paper argues for three core components to be considered to understand rural education, namely: the social space, the collective identity of its members, and teacher pedagogy. A *Blueprint for Rural Education* is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1. The *Blueprint* is an original framework which was designed for use in the author's doctoral thesis (Morphett, 2022) in which it was called the *Blueprint for Rural Mathematics*. Each of the *Blueprint's* three core components are placed in a way to represent pillars signifying that each component is a foundational requirement in understanding rural education. This proposed conceptualisation is underpinned by relationships. The *Blueprint for Rural Education* prioritises the sociocultural aspects of rural communities as important. Hence it is based on an underlying belief that any decision, debate, or curriculum and policy development involving rural education requires consideration of the social space, the identity of its members and the relationships which exist among them, and the teacher pedagogy in use. The development of the *Blueprint* as an analytical tool provides a significant contribution to new knowledge in the scholarship of rural education. This paper suggests educators, educational jurisdictions and policy and curriculum writers, and researchers in their methodology and theory would benefit from using the *Blueprint*, and its core components, in their respective work.

Figure 1: *A Blueprint for Rural Education*
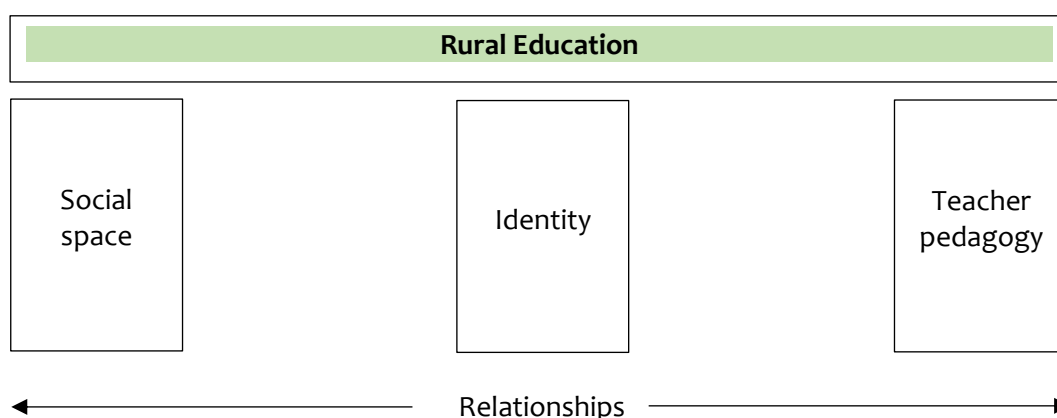
In the following sections, each component is theorised, followed by a discussion around the use of the *Blueprint* as a framework for theorising rural mathematics in the doctoral study.
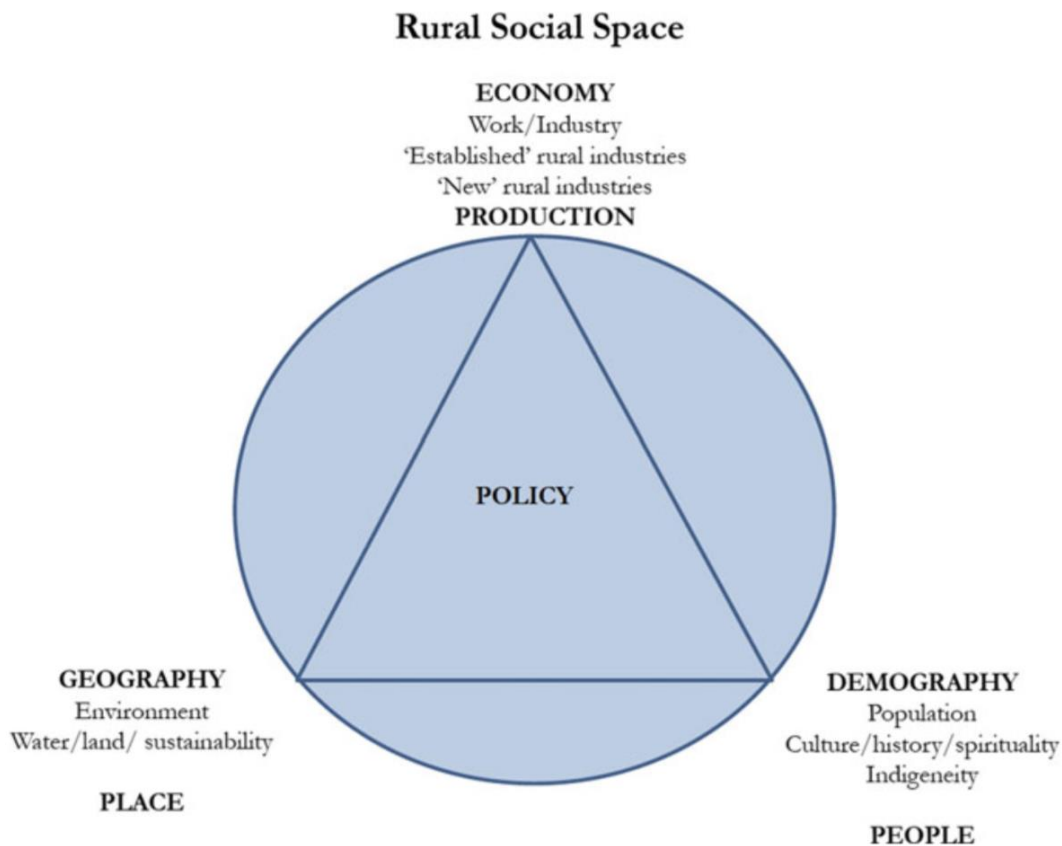
Theoretical Framework Underpinning the *Blueprint*

Social Space

For Bourdieu, social space is a metaphorical construct (Green & Reid, 2021), "*an interaction of field and habitus, which produces and reproduces itself in accordance with the capitals that define it*" (Reid et al., 2010, p. 270). In this sense, the symbolic violence inflicted on rural communities by naming them as 'deficit', 'behind', 'hard to staff' and so on, continues to reproduce and shape the social field in that way and is realised in the habitus of rural students (Green, 2012). Bourdieu describes habitus as "*transposable dispositions*" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53) and "*a way of being, a habitual state*" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 214)—a construct of dispositions within oneself (Corbett & Roberts, 2017), but also those adopted from the outer social space (Green & Reid, 2021) and structured by one's circumstances (Maton, 2014). The Rural Social Space model was developed to challenge the prevalent construction of rural within a deficit discourse (Reid et al., 2010). Reid et al. (2010) conceptualise rural places by the social space which is created within them, and in doing so borrow the definition of rural from Donehower et al. (2007) as including not only geographic and quantitative demographic factors, but also social and cultural aspects encompassing the lived experiences and interactions of rural people in their community (Green & Reid, 2021). The Rural Social Space model aims to challenge stereotypes of rurality and to instead highlight the complexities, realities and advantages of rural places (Green & Reid, 2021; Reid et al., 2010). Rural Social Space additionally sees the daily practices of rural people as pivotal in producing their social space and hence includes the relationships and daily 'doings' that occur among its people (Reid et al., 2010). These social practices in-turn also contribute to the habitus of rural children and adults.

Within the Rural Social Space model, policy is given prominence, acknowledging the way government policy governs the practice of a social space (Green, 2012). This prominence is important as policy has never truly considered the complexities of rural places or what it is like to live and teach in them (Green & Reid, 2021). As pointed out by Green (2008), "*there is little understanding of social space in regard to either rural policy or pedagogy*" (p. 5), highlighting the need to 'know' a rural place. Knowing a rural place, or coming to know a place, is essential in ensuring the relevance and connectedness of the curriculum that will be designed and in the choice of pedagogy teachers adopt (Green, 2012). Knowing a place involves valuing the forms of social and symbolic capital that exist specifically there, which requires using the resources of the people who know (Green, 2012). The Rural Social Space model provides a way to 'know' but as Green and Reid (2021) caution, it cannot be used as a quick overview of a social space but rather requires one to critically interact with each dimension to develop a deep understanding and knowledge of a social space. As such, the Rural Social Space model embraces the differences amongst rural people and the differences between rural communities. The model also incorporates the interrelated dimensions of geography, demography and economy seen at each corner of the central triangle of Figure 2. To understand a specific place, the model allows exploration of its geography and all aspects of its environment from a sustainability standpoint, its economic aspects including the local industries, and the local demographics of which indigeneity is a significant feature. However, a limitation is that the model does not specifically include identity as a feature.

Figure 2: *Rural Social Space*

Rural Social Space

ECONOMY
Work/Industry
'Established' rural industries
'New' rural industries
PRODUCTION

POLICY

GEOGRAPHY
Environment
Water/land/ sustainability
PLACE

DEMOGRAPHY
Population
Culture/history/spirituality
Indigeneity
PEOPLE

Note: Originally reproduced from Green and Reid (2021) with permission from original source (Reid et al., 2010).

Rural Social Space can assist in developing a sociological understanding of a particular rural context by consulting with, asking, and being guided by, the residents of that community (Lockie & Bourke, 2001). However, rural people are rarely consulted on matters which affect education in their community, resulting in decisions being made for them, without their voice (Morphett, 2022). Whilst research shows that developing knowledge of a rural community and its people, geography and economy requires building extensive interpersonal relationships over time (Fuqua, 2019), less is known around the inclusion of aspects of the identities of its people. Developing an understanding of a rural social space requires engaging with its members over time to gain knowledge not only of their lifeworld, but also their identity. Hence, identity is seen as integral to the *Blueprint*.

Identity

Human lifeworld is "*the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations*" (van Manen 2016, p. 101). Alfred Schutz believed an individual has their own lifeworld which he described as "*the taken-for-granted 'common-sense reality' of the social world as it is lived by the ordinary individuals*" (Harrington 2006, p. 341). Edmund Husserl's work defined lifeworld as consisting of not only an individual's beliefs of self, their objective world and that of others, but also as the social, cultural and evolutionary construction of meanings by a community of people who share a common lifeworld (Beyer, 2016). Hence, each person may have multiple lifeworlds dependent on how they are situated historically, culturally and socially. Lifeworld, then, can be seen as the social reality of both an individual and their community. Husserl's inclusion of beliefs

about oneself broadens the lifeworld to also include one's identity. The role of the lifeworld is important in knowing the people and community of a social space and their identity.

The term 'identity' has been defined and conceptualised from differing theoretical perspectives. From a sociocultural perspective, identity is seen not only as 'within' but as situated and negotiated, and as co-constructed through interactions with others (Fellus, 2019), formed from the sum of one's lived experiences of the social, cultural, historical and geographical world (Esteban-Guitart, 2019). As argued by Farnsworth and colleagues (2016), identity refers to how we see ourselves and how others see us, in other words, *"[b]eing recognised as a certain kind of person"* (Gee, 2000, p. 99) by self or others in a given context. Thus identity incorporates "*stories about a person*" (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 1), both one's own narrativisation and that told by others. This implies a belonging and connectedness to the social world and its communities. Hence identity is closely linked to community (Esteban-Guitart, 2019; Gee, 2017; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). However, the identity of a community and its members as told by others needs to be accurate.

The early work of James Gee described four perspectives from which to view one's identity and what it means to be recognised as a certain kind of person—by nature, institutions, discourse, and affinity—any or all of which can be attributed to people who in turn can accept or refuse being recognised in that way (Gee, 2000). Accepting or rejecting an identity requires negotiation and socially positioning oneself, and being positioned by others in a certain way, which may result in one's own view of their identity differing from that which is attributed by others. Identity as both a social and individual construct can be likened to one's habitus (Pearce & Morrison, 2011), such as, when the rural mathematics learner is reported in deficit terms as being behind their urban counterparts; it imposes on them a label which is unable to be negotiated. In this case there may be disparities in the discourse around the mathematics identity and the abilities of the rural learner. Gee's later work distinguished further between activity-based identities where a person freely chooses to participate in some kind of activity and its associated social group, and relational identities where labels are assigned by others, again to be either accepted or rejected (Gee, 2017). However, relational identities such as culture, class, family, and age are generalised, imposed categories which contrast people in relation to others – comparing rural students to urban, for example—where doing so often results in people being labelled and/or stereotyped (Deaux, 1993). Labelling people with a relational identity often results in any difference within the group not being seen nor one's individuality or "*lived reality and diverse experiences*" (Gee 2017, p. 88). Therefore, it is important to consult communities and their members about their own identity and to challenge the imposed identity of the rural mathematics learner presented in the media.

Given that identity involves one's social interactions in daily life (Moulton, 2018), it can be considered an essential link between learning and a student's sociocultural context (Hedges, 2020). Funds of Identity is an approach which recognises aspects of a learner's identity as valuable resources which teachers can use to connect curriculum and learning experiences to the lifeworlds and identities of the learner (Esteban-Guitart, 2019). Developed in 2010 by Esteban-Guitart, the Funds of Identity approach is driven by an equity agenda (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a), to overcome deficit thinking around marginalised groups by using ethnographic methods to gather information of a student's sources of identity (Subero et al., 2017). Funds of Identity is underpinned by Vygotsky's social theory of learning (Esteban-Guitart, 2019) and Bourdieu's sociology (Black et al., 2019). Funds of Identity identifies five main sources—or funds—of a student's identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a), that provide a set of resources or "*box of tools*" to help define oneself (Llopart & Esteban-Guitart, 2017). These funds are:

- social (significant people important in one's lived experience)
- institutional (structures and mechanisms of social order)
- geographical (land, regions, landscapes)

- cultural (symbols, tools, social categories)
- practical (activities, interests, hobbies) (Esteban-Guitart 2016).

The Funds of Identity approach builds on the work of both (Moll et al., 1992) and Bagnoli (2004) to include the identity experiences and perspectives of the students as a valuable resource for learning (Esteban-Guitart, 2019) which can be used by teachers to inform their pedagogical choices and to facilitate contextualised teaching and meaningful learning (Subero et al., 2018). By identifying aspects of the local lifeworld (Poole, 2016) and of a student's identity, the curriculum content can be linked to a student's lived experience and context (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014b). To do so requires that a teacher know and understand their students' identities. Specifically for mathematics, Boaler (2002a) prioritised student identity in her description of mathematics learning as the interrelationship of disciplinary knowledge, the pedagogical practices used, and a student's identity and relationship with mathematics. Boaler's research, although not specific to rural contexts, showed disparities between students developing identity as a person and as a mathematics learner, highlighting the need for teachers to contextualise students' mathematics learning by connecting mathematics content, their pedagogical practice and the identities of their students (Boaler, 2002b). In doing so, students see mathematics as *"integral to their lifeworld beyond the classroom"* (Grootenboer & Zevenbergen, 2008, p. 247). Using Funds of Identity to contextualise the curriculum is particularly useful in engaging students and *"legitimating their lifeworlds"* (Cummins & Early; Tharp et al., cited in Llopart & Esteban-Guitart 2017, p. 258). Given this, Funds of Identity is appropriate for use in rural contexts such as the one in this study. With a call for research and empirical results needed to show the impact of using the Funds of Identity approach (Esteban-Guitart, 2019), this study goes some way in showing how Funds of Identity can be used in research in a rural context.

Teacher Pedagogy

Pedagogy can be described as how content is taught and assessed (Reid, 2018). Further, Alexander (2004) defined pedagogy as *"the act and discourse of teaching"* (p. 8) which encompasses:

> *… the act of teaching together with its attendant discourse of educational theories, values, evidence and justifications. It is what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted. Curriculum is just one of its domains, albeit a central one (p. 11).*

In addition to curriculum, Kerkham (2012) argued that pedagogy is concerned with the *"situated nature of teaching and learning and with what is taught, how it is taught and how it is learned"* (p. 95), and hence that pedagogy is relational, and emerges dialogically through the interactions and relationship between the teacher and student. This teacher–student relationship is central to education and a key factor in student learning (Aspelin, 2014; Ljungblad, 2019). With a future-focused curriculum and pedagogy, teachers are seen as curriculum and learning designers (Reid, 2018) who use their professional knowledge to choose from a 'toolkit' of approaches appropriate to their students, the content, and the context. Choosing from a repertoire of pedagogy requires knowing what is appropriate for students in a given situation (van Manen, 2016) and which pedagogies are appropriate to meet their needs (Stanley, 2008), their cultural backgrounds and for specific domains of knowledge (Stanley, 2008; Luke, 2006).

Dominant opinion is that effective pedagogy, applicable to all domains including mathematics, involves that which is personalised and self-paced, accessible and inclusive, collaborative, lifelong and student-driven (World Economic Forum, 2020). Effective pedagogies are those which involve open, complex and authentic tasks which are problem-based, project-based or inquiry-based, which connect to the wider world, which involve scaffolding to address issues of equity (Paniagua & Istance, 2018). Fundamental to all such pedagogies, is that teachers hold high expectations for all students (Stanley, 2008). Socioculturally informed pedagogies include

culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrison et al., 2019), place-based pedagogy (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Gruenewald, 2003; Somerville et al., 2012), and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2020; McLaren & Giroux, 1990). Culturally responsive pedagogies are those which address social inequities and sociopolitical issues (Ladson-Billings, 1995), reject a deficit discourse by viewing diversity as an asset, connect learning to student lifeworlds, and *"value, and mobilise as resources, the cultural repertoires and intelligences that students bring to the learning relationship"* (Morrison et al., 2019, p. v). Place-based pedagogy acknowledges that *"places are pedagogical"* (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 619)—as seen in 'both-ways' education with its philosophy of country as classroom and its blend of Indigenous culture and language with western numeracy and literacy (The Living Knowledge Project, 2021). Place-based approaches to mathematics teaching recognises that although the mathematics is the same universally, the way in which it is approached is different from place to place (Showalter, 2013). By contrast, critical pedagogy is more concerned with education as political and as sites of social change.

Mathematics also requires domain specific pedagogies (Paniagua & Istance, 2018) where teachers have a positive attitude toward mathematics, and have deep content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Anthony & Walshaw, 2009). Broad agreement prioritises mathematics pedagogy which develops knowledge, proficiencies and capabilities, with a belief of mathematics learning as socially situated. Underpinned by constructivist and sociocultural perspectives, practices recommended for effective mathematics learning include: collaboration and relationships; making connections; contextualised learning; embedding proficiencies and critical thinking skills within mathematics learning experiences; inquiry, investigations and open-ended tasks; explicit instruction; scaffolding; challenging tasks; differentiation; and, student assessment. Further, in their review of Australasian studies which have explored powerful mathematics pedagogical practices, Hunter et al. (2016) reported that effective mathematics classrooms focus on social aspects of learning including positive discourse, student dialogue and sharing of thinking, and being culturally responsive by linking learning to students' lifeworld— their social and cultural context, experiences and interests with real-world applications. Incorporating student lifeworld involves contextualised learning by incorporating students' resources in their teaching of mathematics (Aguirre & del Rosario Zavala, 2013). Aspects of a student's identity such as their interests are important resources for contextualising mathematics, with interest-based learning recognised as an effective pedagogy in enabling academic engagement (Azevedo, 2013; Rosicka, 2016). Contextualising learning to the lifeworld of the student requires teachers to know aspects of the identity of the student and their wider community, and of local knowledges (Subero et al., 2018). Combining disciplinary content knowledge with life-based knowledge where students, families and local community members share their cultural ways of knowing can assist to *"make the community curricular"* (Zipin, et al., 2012, p. 183). Zipin (2020) suggested doing this by incorporating a student's geographic context, their family, and local community members in the learning program.

The *Teach for Robust Understanding of Mathematics* framework was developed after an extensive literature review of aspects of powerful mathematics instruction including existing frameworks and known pedagogical practices (Schoenfeld, 2018). The *Teach for Robust Understanding* framework specifies five dimensions identified in research as imperative for mathematically powerful learning, and stated that effective mathematics classrooms are those which adopt pedagogical practices which attend to these five dimensions. As seen in Figure 3, these dimensions are: 1) mathematics content; 2) cognitive demand; 3) equitable access to content; 4) student agency, ownership and identity; and 5) formative assessment. Classrooms that do well in each of these five dimensions in their pedagogical choices produce mathematics students who are knowledgeable and powerful thinkers and problem solvers (Schoenfeld, 2014; Schoenfeld et al., 2019). The first of these dimensions is content-based with the remaining four focused on how the learner experiences the discipline of mathematics (Schoenfeld & the Teaching for Robust Understanding Project, 2016).

Figure 3: *The Teach for Robust Understanding of Mathematics Framework*

The Five Dimensions of Powerful Mathematics Classrooms

The Mathematics	Cognitive Demand	Equitable Access to Mathematics	Agency, Ownership, and Identity	Formative Assessment
The extent to which classroom activity structures provide opportunities for students to become knowledgeable, flexible, and resourceful mathematical thinkers. Discussions are focused and coherent, providing opportunities to learn mathematical ideas, techniques, and perspectives, make connections, and develop productive mathematical habits of mind.	The extent to which students have opportunities to grapple with and make sense of important mathematical ideas and their use. Students learn best when they are challenged in ways that provide room and support for growth, with task difficulty ranging from moderate to demanding. The level of challenge should be conducive to what has been called "productive struggle."	The extent to which classroom activity structures invite and support the active engagement of all of the students in the classroom with the core mathematical content being addressed by the class. Classrooms in which a small number of students get most of the "air time" are not equitable, no matter how rich the content: all students need to be involved in meaningful ways.	The extent to which students are provided opportunities to "walk the walk and talk the talk" – to contribute to conversations about mathematical ideas, to build on others' ideas and have others build on theirs – in ways that contribute to their development of agency (the willingness to engage), their ownership over the content, and the development of positive identities as thinkers and learners.	The extent to which classroom activities elicit student thinking and subsequent interactions respond to those ideas, building on productive beginnings and addressing emerging misunderstandings. Powerful instruction "meets students where they are" and gives them opportunities to deepen their understandings.

Note: Reproduced from Schoenfeld and the Teaching for Robust Understanding Project (2016, p. 1) with kind permission from A. Schoenfeld in 2023.

Little research has explored the mathematics pedagogy in use in the social context of rural schooling, particularly in light of students' rural context and rural identity. A unique feature of the *Teach for Robust Understanding* framework is that it draws specific attention to issues around equity and access to mathematics. This was particularly useful to this study given the unique challenges faced by schools in rural locations. Learning about and getting 'to know' a rural community through consultation and asking its members, requires adoption of an ethical framework (Poole, 2017). The ethically-based *Teach for Robust Understanding* framework is useful for this purpose.

Methodology

Methodologically, this study pursued a sociocultural framing in its recognition of a social purpose of education and that mathematics learning is inherently socially situated. To gain insight from rural teachers, the research methodology adopted two phases of data collection across a six-month period—a Phase One mixed-method survey of Yorke Peninsula middle-primary teachers, and a Phase Two multi-method case study of one school. The merits of this methodological design were realised by engaging participants' voices from across the entire Yorke Peninsula district. The study gained ethical approval (protocol 201831), and the authors acknowledge the Commonwealth Government's contribution through an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, and the contribution from UniSA of the Rural and Isolated Scholarship.

The mixed-method survey was offered to all Yorke Peninsula teachers of years 3-6 middle-primary mathematics (n=70) in all 17 Yorke Peninsula schools and received anonymous responses (n=22).

The analysis found that Yorke Peninsula teachers are teaching in complicated environments involving a complex and diverse student population, and where they are constrained by a significant lack of access to elements critical for their effective teaching of mathematics. Findings of the survey were presented under three main themes—lack of access, contextualised and relational pedagogy, and knowing students well.

The Phase Two case study involved two teachers and an Education Support Officer in one school—Golden Fields Primary School (a pseudonym)—a small rural school situated in a coastal town on Yorke Peninsula. Physically, the school's location is described as moderately accessible according to the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA), and as outer regional by the Australian Statistical Geography Classification Remoteness Structure (ASGS-RA) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Methods used to explore the experiences of these teachers and the mathematics pedagogy they adopt included interviews, focus groups, document analysis and classroom observation of a unit of work on four days a week over a three-week period. The first teacher designed a unit of work around a House and Land Measurement assignment, whilst the second teacher designed a Sports Day unit which integrated time, data, money and chance. These units of work were complemented by observations of numeracy presentations by six community members at the school's mathematics Guest Speaker Day which was organised by the Education Support Officer. The case study methodology had sound validity particularly due to the extensive site visits and broad range of methods employed. However, it is acknowledged the case study relied on the dialogue and opinions from adults—teachers, principals, Educational Support Officers and community members. This limitation suggests future research may benefit from the voice of the parents and students themselves which would be a valid inclusion.

Initial thematic analysis revealed the two middle-primary teachers provided contextualised mathematics where students worked collaboratively on differentiated, investigative tasks which were supported by scaffolded explicit instruction. Additional opportunities for rich mathematical experiences were supported by parents and members of the wider community through *Electives* and *Integrated Studies* where mathematics was used in real-world areas of interest to the students, for example, fishing, cooking, design and technology. Thematic analysis was followed by a meta-analysis using the *Blueprint for rural mathematics*. This study adopted the recommendation of White (2015) to use Rural Social Space as part of a triad of theoretical tools, and hence is innovative in building on the theoretical underpinnings of the Rural Social Space model by combining it with Funds of Identity and *Teach for Robust Understanding*. Thus, the *Blueprint* was used as an analytical tool to theorise the rural social space of the Yorke Peninsula and the identity of its members as it relates to the mathematics learning of its students. Whilst Esteban-Guitart (2016) acknowledged the limitations of the Funds of Identity approach in generalising the diversity within a group, this study constructed a collective identity of the Yorke Peninsula people using examples where teachers, the Educational Support Officer, students and community members showed their personal connection to the Yorke Peninsula and to their mathematics teaching and learning. Use of the *Blueprint* for this meta-analysis identified three dilemmas Yorke Peninsula teachers face in creating optimal conditions for teaching and learning mathematics in rural schools given the constraints they face: (1) metrocentric policy dominance; (2) curriculum which excludes the rural context and identity with no guidance on how to make it relevant; and, (3) meeting the needs of the rural mathematics student.

Adopting the *Blueprint* for the meta-analysis allowed for theorising the data from three differing perspectives—social space, identity, and mathematics pedagogy. Doing so assisted in understanding some of the complexities faced by the rural middle-primary mathematics teacher and learner and was useful in developing a positive discourse by prioritising their context and identity as important. An additional purpose of using multiple conceptual frameworks in this study was much like that adopted by Wolf (1992)—to counteract the researcher's insider bias. The use of the *Blueprint* for the meta-analysis provided new insights into how the rural context

and identity are essential considerations in teacher pedagogical choice in mathematics learning of the rural student.

Discussion of the *Blueprint for Rural Mathematics*

Research has emphasised a need for a social construction of rurality and the importance of students' context in their learning (Halfacree 1993; Coladarci 2007; Green 2012). Indeed, constructivism and sociocultural theory inform many mathematics pedagogical practices which are recommended in scholarly research. However, limited scholarship has explored the need to consult rural people in order to understand aspects of their social space, lifeworld and identity to assist in designing relevant and appropriate mathematics teaching and learning. The *Blueprint* was designed for this specific purpose.

In conceptualising the *Blueprint*, Morphett (2022) drew on the literature previously discussed to create the framework. By bringing together the three components of social space, identity and teacher pedagogy which each have their own theoretical underpinnings, the sociocultural aspect of rural communities is prioritised. This assumes an epistemological stance of valuing the local knowledges of rural students. Morphett's (2022) use of the *Blueprint* drew on Reid et al.'s (2010) Rural Social Space model for the first component, and its three key elements of geography, demography and economy. However, whilst the Rural Social Space model prioritises all three elements as important in understanding a rural space, scholarly research which has utilised RSS had not yet explored rural people's identity in tandem with Rural Social Space. Therefore, as identity is a central focus of sociocultural theory (Grootenboer et al., 2006), the *Blueprint's* second component of identity adopted Esteban-Guitart's Funds of Identity approach to investigate the collective identity of Yorke Peninsula residents. The *Blueprint's* third component of teacher pedagogy applied the *Teach for Robust Understanding* framework to explore the pedagogical practices adopted by Yorke Peninsula teachers of mathematics.

Each of these three components individually provided avenues for viewing the rural mathematics learner in positive terms, and collectively prioritised the importance of aspects of a student's lifeworld in their learning, including their social context and identity. Each component's ability to counter the common deficit thinking of the rural mathematics learner was useful in theorising the dilemmas faced by rural mathematics teachers and learners and the possibilities for their future. The *Blueprint for Rural Education* allows freedom for others to choose alternate conceptual frameworks for the components of social space, identity and teacher pedagogy applicable to the specific needs of their work.

The use of the *Blueprint* provided a detailed insight into the relationships between the Yorke Peninsula community, its social space, the collective identity of its residents, and the mathematics pedagogy adopted by middle-primary teachers. The meta-analysis guided, by the *Blueprint,* found that whilst compliant with accountability and system requirements, teachers chose to prioritise the teaching of mathematics in ways that cater for the needs of their students, and which involve their rural context and identity, despite metrocentric policy and curriculum. *Knowing students* is paramount in providing appropriate mathematics for meeting the needs of rural students. Knowing students requires dialogue—asking and listening—all of which is reliant on solid student–teacher relationships having been established. The meta-analysis highlighted that Yorke Peninsula rural teachers are teaching mathematics in ways which do not reflect the common depiction of rural difference as deficit and recommended that the voice of rural people be heard; highlighting that knowing the rural context and the identity of its people is paramount in viewing both in positive terms.

The development of the *Blueprint* offers a contribution to theory in rural mathematics studies by calling attention to the interrelated roles social space, identity and pedagogy play in teaching rural mathematics. As an analytical tool, the *Blueprint* is offered for use by educators, educational

jurisdictions, and policy and curriculum writers in their respective work. Additionally, the *Blueprint* is a tool offered for use by future researchers such that, when multiple studies using the *Blueprint* have been conducted in different but related contexts, collectively their contributions to knowledge could be substantial, extending beyond this initial, yet innovative study.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the theoretical underpinnings of a *Blueprint*, and its potential as both a conceptual and analytical tool. The *Blueprint* broadens the definition of rurality by drawing on the components of social space, identity and teacher pedagogy—its framework contributing to the theoretical underpinnings of rural mathematics.

The study contributes new methodological and theoretical knowledge as a result of the development and use of the *Blueprint* as an analytical framework. Using the conceptual tools of the Rural Social Space model, the Funds of Identity approach, and the *Teach for Robust Understanding* framework for each of the three components of the *Blueprint* was key to theorising the Yorke Peninsula rural social space, the identity of its members, the pedagogy in use by Yorke Peninsula teachers of mathematics, and ultimately what is happening in rural mathematics classrooms on Yorke Peninsula. The use of the *Blueprint* models a new approach in furthering an understanding of mathematics practice in rural classrooms. The *Blueprint* is both conceptually and analytically innovative and can support educators, policy writers and researchers in their work. Not only can the *Blueprint* be used for future mathematics research in rural contexts, it can also be adopted for other contexts. Further, whilst the *Blueprint* has a significant emphasis on mathematics, the components of social space, identity and teacher pedagogy are key considerations for future rural research in other disciplines.

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Parents' Perceptions on Parental Involvement in Their Children's Education in Giyani Municipality Rural-based Schools, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

The importance of parental involvement in their children's education has received considerable attention recently. This study explores parents' perceptions of their involvement in children's education in the Giyani Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa. It follows Epstein's theory of school-parent-community partnerships to understand parents' involvement in their children's education. A qualitative approach was employed to guide the generation and analysis of the data. Fifty-eight parents were selected from the four rural-based schools. They participated in several focus group discussions that were audio-recorded. Inductive qualitative thematic analysis was used, and ethics were observed. The findings reveal parents' perceptions on parental involvement in their children's education as working with schools, homework assistance, modelling positive attitudes, emotional support, and career counselling. This study has implications for policy and practice in a parent-teacher relationship in rural-based schools. It suggests that parents should be involved in policy development, such as when the curriculum changes.

Keywords: *children's education, educational achievement, emotional support, parental involvement, rural-based schools.*

Introduction

Parental involvement in their children's educational achievement has become apparent throughout the world (Badri et al., 2014). It can be defined as the actions that parents perform to enhance their children's academic achievement in cooperation with teachers and other school staff (Kalaycı & Ergül, 2020). It can refer to the parental activities performed at home or school regarding their children's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This may include moral support (Shearer, 2006), purchasing school materials and uniforms for their children, developing a positive parent-child relationship, or attending school meetings (Clinton & Hattie, 2013). This

may also include emotional support (Munje & Mncube (2018). Parents' active involvement in children's education improves their academic achievement and cognitive growth (Kalaycı & Ergül, 2020; Sibanda, 2021).

Schools need the support of communities and families to satisfy the diverse needs of children. They are often regarded as formalised extensions of the family. For instance, they are responsible for increasing children's understanding of and exposure to democratic participation (Nthontho, 2017). Parents (or the family) and the school must collaborate and cooperate for a child to grow and learn effectively because none of them can do so independently (Nthontho, 2017). All support children's learning and pave the way for accomplishing educational objectives.

However, studies have shown that parents do not affect how education is delivered (Nthontho, 2017). Furthermore, studies on parental involvement from school administrators and teachers were done whereby parents' views were left out by Munje and Mncube (2018) and Yulianti et al. (2022). This gap in parental involvement is what motivated this study to concentrate on finding out how parents see their involvement in their children's education in rural schools located in Giyani Municipality. This work focuses on parents' perceptions and takes into consideration their views and opinions about what they share regarding their participation in ensuring that children succeed in their academic performance, in contrast to Thomas et al.'s study (2020), which reflected the perceptions of both students and their parents regarding parental involvement. This study explored how parents view their involvement in their children's education in the Giyani Municipality, Limpopo Province in South Africa. The objective was to determine the way in which parents are involved in their children's education. The study contributes to the design and implementation of innovative programmes for parents and teachers that can foster parental involvement in rural-based schools in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. The following sections discuss the literature on parental involvement in children's education, the theoretical framework, methodology, and findings. We then move to the discussion of these findings and finally conclude.

Parental Involvement in Their Children's Education

Western Perspectives

Parental involvement is an important component of quality education, which can be enhanced by parents when they spend quality time with their children at home and help them with home-schooling (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Andrew et al., 2020). For instance, in Norway, Schmid and Garrels (2021) find that it leads to improved academic performance. Furthermore, Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) assert that it allows teachers to involve parents in the education process. Teachers can invite parents to attend the meetings to endorse certain decisions taken by the school (McKenna & Millen, 2023). Parents can support their children in school events such as sports days, assemblies, and concerts. They can then get the opportunity to observe how their children relate to each other and with their educators, which is important for a child's educational development (Bromley & Yazdanpanah, 2021). Likewise, parental support influences children's decisions in career choices (Parola &Marcionetti, 2022; To et al., 2022). Indeed, children who receive parental support at home are more likely to make a good career choice compared to children who do not receive support. This is facilitated by parents who have educational skills and find it easy to motivate and help their children with schoolwork at home (Ceka & Murati, 2016; Benner et al., 2016).

Generally speaking, parents have a responsibility to provide their children with emotional support, as this will contribute to the children's educational attainment (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Bhamani et al., 2020; Collie et al., 2019). However, Sanchez (2020) shows that the community of Greenfield in California faces significant challenges due to a lack of resources and tools for parental involvement. Additionally, she contends that the lack of parental involvement may have

a negative impact on students' performance and ultimately affect their educational development and success.

African Perspectives

In the African context, education is generally understood as a three-legged pot, a proverb which means that it is the responsibility of three stakeholders (Arko-Achemfuor, 2018). The first leg represents parents in the family or community where children belong. The second and the third legs stand for the school stakeholders and the government. The latter provides significant resources and support as indicated in each country's national policy. However, the extent of the presence of parents in school education is exceptional in many African countries (Arko-Achemfuor, 2018). Children's education has practically only been taken care of by the schools and government (Nthontho, 2017).

Nevertheless, Nthontho (2017) establishes that parents are required to take part in school activities that are planned by the school administration (e.g., by attending meetings). In Lesotho this largely limits parents to mere spectators without actual involvement in what happens and is decided in those meetings. Nthontho adds that Lesotho's educational officials are not successful in keeping parents involved in their children's education, which may lead to parents' failure to make sure that their children attend school. This concurs with earlier research conducted in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) by Monadjem (2009), which discovers that Swazi teachers have little knowledge of parental involvement or their role in establishing it. Monadjem (2009) also finds that parents do not always choose to get active in schools and do not always understand the value of their involvement. In Ghana, parental involvement is influenced by parents' intrinsic motivation to provide their children with quality education while keeping an eye on the conduct of teachers, to ensure that their children are not subjected to discrimination, unfairness, or abuse at the hands of their teachers (Appiah-Kubi & Amoako, 2020). In Nigeria, Obayopo (2017) asserts that parents are involved with their children's education by delegating older siblings to assist children with homework. Additionally, parents monitor their children's homework and assignment completion. They appropriately nourish their children before they leave for school, which is essential for children's health and wellbeing (Obayopo, 2017).

South African Perspectives

In South Africa, the concept of parental involvement in children's education is important since it is fundamental in correcting historical educational disparities and enhancing children's educational outcomes. In North West Province, South Africa, Matshe (2014) examines the difficulties of parental involvement in rural public schools. He highlights the desperate situation of parents who are unable to meaningfully contribute to their children's education due to their underprivileged educational background and how their lack of involvement undermines quality public education. His conclusion is twofold. Firstly, parental involvement is a constitutional requirement that should be properly embraced by all stakeholders in maintaining high-quality public education. Secondly, parents around the rural public schools in North West Province require capacity-building intervention.

Furthermore, Sibanda (2021) notes that parental involvement in South African schools has primarily consisted of making tuition payments and showing up to school functions including attending meetings. However, this focus has shifted, as parental involvement now reflects the democratisation of education, in which parents are given the authority to participate in the decision-making process in schools. Parent-teacher collaborations are acknowledged by the government as an important pillar of the school's tripartite structure, which includes students, parents (community), and teachers. The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) indeed states that parents should be involved in their children's education by serving on the school governing body, which is an official structure for parental involvement.

According to Sedibe and Fourie (2018), home schooling is challenging for many parents as they usually become reluctant to participate in curriculum planning, learning support provisioning and the development of individual education support plans. This lack of involvement might cause parents to have misconceptions, which would then cause many families to be excluded from the school, further exacerbating their children's learning difficulties. In addition, Maluleke (2014) found that barriers to parental involvement exist in the Vhembe District of Limpopo because of factors like parents' low educational levels, their poor socioeconomic status, the absence of a school policy, poor communication, or teachers' attitudes towards parents. His findings are supported by Munje and Mncube (2018), who associated educators' perceptions of parent non-involvement, whereby educators were not considering contextual factors that limit involvement, which could possibly alienate parents.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Epstein's (1995) theory of school-parent-community partnerships to better understand the involvement of parents in their children's education. The theory has six factors, namely parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community.

The theory recognises the important role that families and the community play in supporting student learning and development. This is because children develop within multiple contexts that must connect with one another (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). By involving families and the community in meaningful ways, schools can create a more supportive and enriching learning environment for students. For instance, in the parenting aspect, parents maintain a life-long commitment to their children by providing a safe and healthy home environment as well as developing positive attitudes towards learning for children to succeed (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017).

According to Epstein (1995), parents should keep abreast of information pertaining to their children's education and maintain regular communication with teachers, either by attending meetings or receiving reports from schools through children. This emphasises the importance of two-way communication between schools and families. It can help to build trust and understanding between educators and families, leading to effective collaboration and support for student learning.

The volunteering factor is about seeking help and support from parents for school programmes and children's activities, which could include mobilising funds, keeping the school premises clean and getting involved in the school feeding schemes. As a result, by including parents in school activities, schools must care for both children and their parents (Epstein, 1995, 2018). However, research indicates inadequate participation of parents in the involvement of children's education (Munje & Mncube, 2018). If parents are not sufficiently involved in the school planned activities, there could be a possibility that they may become observers of their children's education without contributing meaningful ideas in what happens in schools (Nthontho, 2017). Therefore, schools should understand the context of the community and parents' histories and welcome stakeholder involvement because it influences children's attendance and their performance. If schools fail to involve parents, that could possibly lead to their neglect to ascertain that their children attend school, which may trigger children's poor performance while increasing their dropout (Bayley et al., 2023).

The learning-at-home factor provides parents with information on what children are doing in the classroom and how to help them with homework and other school-related activities (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Epstein, 1995). Parents play a monitoring role. Obayopo (2017) indicates that parents ensure that their children do not suffer unfair treatment by teachers.

The sixth and last factor stresses that parents take part in the school decision making when they participate in the school governing bodies or committees as laid down by some government

policies (see for instance the Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) in South Africa in our context). The expectation therefore is that the decision-making powers pertaining to education of children would be distributed equally between all stakeholders regardless of their status or level (Grooms & Childs, 2021).

Overall, Epstein's theory of school-parent-community partnerships is appreciated for promoting student success by fostering meaningful involvement between schools, families, and the community. However, if involvement by each stakeholder is not clearly unpacked and roles are not clarified, this could lead parents not to comprehend their significance in parental involvement (e.g., the experience in Eswatini reported by Monadjem (2009)). The theory suggests that schools should understand communities' context and parents' backgrounds and embrace them despite differing ideas, attitudes, and problems because stakeholder involvement improves children's educational success (Epstein, 1995; 2018; Munje & Mncube, 2018).

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretative paradigm with the aim of understanding social members within the society (Schwant, 2009) using a qualitative research approach within a phenomenological qualitative research design (Rakotsoane, 2019). The qualitative research approach was considered essential because it gave the researchers the opportunity to interact with parents in their social setting. The sample comprised fifty-eight (n=58) purposively selected parents of learners in the four rural primary schools in the Giyani Municipality, Limpopo Province. The purposive sampling technique allowed the researchers to subjectively apply their own judgment to select the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The authors had access to the participating primary schools as part of their community engagement project between the university and the selected schools. Therefore, the data were gathered during the baseline phase with the engaged schools. This study exclusively examined parents' perceptions of the involvement of their children's education.

The data were collected through the focus group discussions. This gave parents the opportunity to express themselves about their involvement in their children's education. Focus group discussions are group interviews meant to better understand how people feel or think about an issue in their own social setting (De Vos et al., 2011). For the inclusion criteria, the researchers asked teachers if they could identify parents who have children studying in the selected rural primary schools including those that were participating as members of the School Governing Body. Participants were excluded if they did not have a child studying in the selected schools in the Giyani Municipality.

One focus group discussion (De Vos et al., 2011) was conducted in each school, making a total of four focus group discussions. In the first three schools, the focus group discussions comprised 15 participants each, while there were only 13 participants in the fourth school. The discussions in each focus group were about one hour long. The participants were given the opportunity to express themselves in Xitsonga, their home language. The research assistant who understood Xitsonga helped in transcribing and translating the parents' perceptions from Xitsonga to English. The focus group discussion guide is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Questions in the Focus Group Discussion Guide*

What are your experiences in terms of your cooperation with education?
How do you encourage your children to write their homework?
How can the school help you to ensure that homework is done, especially in situations where grannies cannot read and write?
How do you address your children's emotional needs?
How do you support your children at home?
How do you advise your children regarding their future careers?

The study was granted ethical clearance by the University of South Africa (Ethics certificate no: 2016/09/14/90171969). The ethical considerations were followed to help the researchers determine the difference between what is acceptable and what is not (Rakotsoane, 2019). The four schools were visited prior to the beginning of the research. This allows the researchers to explain the purpose of the study and arrange a convenient time for conducting the focus group discussion with the parents at the school premises. Parents' informed consent was obtained from signed consent forms. Parents were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the data collection without consequences. They were ensured confidentiality and anonymity before the data collection. Pseudonyms were used to de-identify the parents' real names.

The inductive thematic data analysis was done following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide. The data were transcribed, coded, and categorised to identify themes. All the six steps of thematic analysis were followed. The researchers read and re-read the transcribed data and identified the emerging codes. Coding was essential because it helped reduce the amount of raw data to what was necessary for responding to the research questions. Each identified code was named and the final phase which required the writing of the report was followed. The quotations were used to avoid misinterpreting the participants' views as well as to connect various themes.

Findings

Parents reported that they faced many challenges to effectively assist their children with schoolwork. They confirmed their involvement in their children's education in aspects such as collaboration with schools, homework assistance, modelling positive attitudes, career counselling and emotional support.

Collaboration with Schools

Parental involvement enhances quality education, particularly in rural schools. Thus, parents in these schools ensured that they developed strong working relationships with the schools to support teachers in strengthening teaching and learning. In this regard, parents confirmed that they cooperated with schools by getting involved in auditing of school finances, to make sure that finances were handled well to improve teaching and learning. The following excerpts highlight how the participants viewed their cooperation with the schools as prominent in their children's education:

"We monitor the utilisation of finances accordingly" (Sisiliya from school A). Similarly, another participant reiterated that: *"The finance committee at school is working well because it buys resources that we have agreed upon" (Mahluri from school C).* Again: *"Our school never experienced mismanagement of funds because there is the auditing of finance reports." (Lovelini from school D).*

The above extracts from the parents demonstrate that their involvement in their children's education in school finance prevents the mismanagement of funds from occurring in schools. This parental involvement enhances the strengthening of the school finances wherein this parent-school relationship sees parents and teachers agreeing on the resources that must be bought in schools to improve teaching and learning. It is noteworthy that regardless of the parents' educational background their involvement in the auditing of the school finances is important for transparency and accountability in these rural-based schools.

Another area of involvement that the parents elaborated on was maintenance of good hygienic practice. In cooperation with the school, they ensured that the school premises were kept clean. One of the participants said: *"When I come to school and find it dirty, I clean it." (Hlopheka from school B).*

The above quotation indicates parents' positive working relationship with schools. It promotes good hygiene by cleaning schools' surroundings. Their action ensured that their children learned in a conducive environment.

Homework Assistance

Homework assistance is another prominent theme whereby parents indicated that when their children were given schoolwork by their teachers to complete at home, they always assisted them and made sure that their children completed it. The extract below illustrates this:

> *When I see my children not writing I ask if they don't have work to do from school. Then they do that. When they ask me to do their homework with them, I tell them to do it first and I will check after they've written. I do correct where I can but where I can't due to the current system, I send them to people who can assist (Xihluke from school A).*

Homework is important for children's educational achievement since it promotes academic flexibility and progression to higher levels. Curriculum changes also frequently make it difficult for participants to support their children with homework. Therefore, some parents expressed their struggle to assist their children with content that they were not familiar with. Similarly, other participants, who had good working relationships with teachers, could visit the school and inquire about their child's homework performance. The next assertion makes this clear.

> *It is my responsibility to ensure that she does her homework. My challenge is that what our children learn today differs from what we learned so to address that I make a follow-up by going to ask the teacher if what my child has written is correct (Xitsakisi from school D).*

Another parent interjected: *"I do help my child, but I don't get examples or guidance on how to help him, especially that what I learned during my school days differs from what is learned today" (Vuthlari from school A).*

These excerpts serve as examples of how curriculum changes that contradict what the participants learned in school have a negative impact on the level of assistance they could provide their children at home. To ensure parents have the skills needed to help their children at home with their schoolwork, the school education curriculum policy committees must include parents in the policy formulation process.

For parents without a formal education, assisting children with homework can be very difficult. As a result, parents without a formal education find it hard to help their children with school-related issues. For instance, one participant stated that she was unable to help her child with their schoolwork because she could not read. She said: *"I stay alone with a child, and I am not able to read and write, therefore, I cannot help my child. I am also afraid to call my neighbours to come and help my child." (Matimu from school C).*

According to the quotation above, not all parents were able to help their children with their schoolwork at home. The participant claimed that her lack of literacy was a problem that restricted her ability to be involved in her child's education at home. The participant admitted to feeling nervous when considering how to approach people who could help her child with homework. Furthermore, one of the participants addressed these problems by advocating for at least an additional hour of teachers' instruction to help their children. They stated:

> There should be extra classes, at least for 1 hour. They [children] need teachers that can help them during extra classes. For instance, if the school knocks off at 14:30. Children come back a 16:00 so that they can knock off at 17:00 (Rhulani from school A).

The quotations above demonstrate that teachers should sacrifice their time and give these children extra lessons because some parents were unable to help their children with schoolwork at home.

Modelling a Positive Attitude

One proven technique for shaping and reinforcing positive behaviours in children from an early age so that they behave in a socially acceptable manner inside the school environment is modelling a positive attitude. The participants affirmed that they supported a disciplinary strategy to mould their children's behaviour by instilling moral values that were critical to their academic success. Some of the participants hinted that: *"I encourage a child good moral, to make friends with good people, and to come back early, to not sleep out and to help him with his schoolwork" (Solani from school D).* This also came from other schools: *"My strength is in the monitoring of my child that she conducts herself well, reads the books, listens to educators, makes friends with good people" (Nkhensani from school A).* Furthermore: *"My strength is encouraging my child to wake up in the morning and to go to school. I prepare warm water for her so that she may be motivated" (Hluvukani from school B).*

According to testimonies, parents were crucial in helping their children develop moral values that aid in their education. Parents emphasised that they encouraged them to love reading books and respect their teachers at school. They also mentioned that they pushed their children to associate with good people, get up early in the morning, and get ready for school as a way of disciplining them. Parents were responsible for ensuring that children were cared for at home, as evidenced by the fact that they woke up early in the morning and prepared warm water for their children to bathe before they went to school.

Career Counselling

Parents can play a significant role in fostering positive attitudes in their children by offering career counselling. This is essential in making sure that children choose wisely when it comes to their careers. Some parents clarified that, despite their limited understanding of the ongoing curriculum changes that led to the new stream of subjects, they always encouraged their children to make educated decisions when selecting a career. When asked how they helped their children choose careers, they expressed the following sentiment: *"I do, but I don't know about the required facilities and stream of subjects that he must follow for the choice that he has made" (Kedibone from school C).* The same was echoed in the following excerpts: *"I do speak to my child about his future, it's true we need doctors in our area because when you go to the hospital, they tell us that doctors are not available" (Hluvuko from school B).* Again, they said: *"My child wants to be a soccer player; I do motivate him to be a soccer player" (Vunani from school D).*

The above quotations demonstrate that parents actively participated in fulfilling their responsibility of assisting their children to know and understand the world of work so that they could choose a good career, which was crucial for making decisions about their lives. The fact that some of the participants recognised how crucial it was to inspire their children to pursue their passions is also an intriguing aspect. For instance, a participant demonstrated her support

for her child's desire to pursue a career in soccer. Fewer parents, especially in rural schools, would encourage their children to play soccer as a career. Therefore, a parent's support of her child in this decision was crucial for the growth that could aid in the child's educational success.

Emotional Support

One of the important elements in fostering young children's healthy development, positive youth development, and educational achievement is the emotional support that parents can give them. The responses below serve as excellent illustrations:

> In addressing my child's emotional need, I comforted the child and then conducted some investigations. I know that children are not always innocent. They may be hurt by things that they have started. I remember one day he came back crying that his friends were calling me names. When I investigated, I found out that it was him who started calling his friend's mother a derogatory name. And then I and that mother cushioned our children from such behaviour (Voni from school A).

On another account:

> I have two children in this school. Teachers do intervene when they see a problem with our children. They once called me about my son who was starting to befriend the wrong people. They talked to him, and I too talked to him (Thsungo from school D).

According to the quotes mentioned above, parents could provide their children with emotional support by collaborating with teachers to prevent them from hanging out with the wrong peers at school. Some of the parents also mentioned that they talked to their children about any hurtful things that might worry them to provide emotional support for their children.

Discussion

The findings reveal novel insights into the perceptions of parents in their involvement in children's education in rural-based schools in the Limpopo province, South Africa. The findings indicate that parents collaborate with schools in the auditing of the school finances. This action of taking part in the way finances were handled to improve the teaching and learning of their children's education illustrates one of the legs determined by Arko-Achemfuor (2018). This result supports Sibanda's (2021) claims that parents should be aware of how money is used in schools if they are paying tuition and purchasing school materials for their children. Similarly, parents stipulated that they voluntarily ensured that the school premises were kept clean. This supports parenting and volunteering factors of Epstein's (1995) theory that signals parents' maintenance of a clean and healthy location for their children which also communicates an optimistic standpoint towards learning (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Likewise, because parents' perspectives were not explored in Munje and Mncube's (2018) study, this finding in rural schools in Limpopo contradicts their claims about parental non-involvement in education.

The findings revealed that parents play instrumental roles in children's education by assisting them with homework. They monitored that it was well-written and completed. This supports the contentions by Obayopo (2017). While Hornby and Lafaele (2011) recommend that parents help their children with their education and spend quality time with them, parents in Limpopo Province's rural schools mentioned certain difficulties. More and more evidence emerged about the curriculum's constant modification, which makes it difficult for other parents to help their children with their homework. Both parents with no formal education and parents with formal education—albeit with a different curriculum at the time—were impacted by this. This supports the findings of Sedibe and Fourie (2018) about the difficulties parents encounter in taking part in the development and modification of curricula. Furthermore, parents from disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances or with low educational attainment may not help their children

with their schoolwork (Matshe, 2014). This could have an impact on the quality of education that children receive.

Consequently, this finding partially confirms Epstein's theory aspect of learning at home. Parents are given information on what children are doing in schools, without necessarily indicating on how they could help them with homework (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Epstein, 1995). Parents reported not getting guidance on how to assist children with homework, which further accelerated their difficulties with the curriculum that they found challenging. It can be noted that parents have a greater role to play as they support children at home as well as from the school side (by assisting in their schoolwork), but the schools should also understand that parents are involved as parents not as teachers. Therefore, teachers must provide clear explanations for parents to understand what to do when assisting in homework to avoid the possibility of alienating parents (practically excluding them) from getting involved in their children's education as well as frustrating them.

This implies the need for rural-based schools in Limpopo to organise quarterly workshops targeting parents with training regarding curriculum changes to avoid further isolating them (Nthontho, 2017; Munje & Mncube, 2018; Sedibe & Fourie, 2018; Sanchez, 2020; Bayley et al., 2023). Challenges associated with parental involvement seem to cut across all contexts, including Europe and Africa, including South Africa. This study recommends that schools and other stakeholders such as social workers, psychologists, children, and youth care workers in communities around rural-based schools in Limpopo Province should work together and identify children who stay with parents who cannot read and write and visit and assist them with schoolwork at home.

The findings outline the modelling of a positive attitude whereby parents indicated their encouragement to children not to associate with peers who might influence them negatively. Instead, parents reported that they encourage their children to focus on their studies, which is essential for their academic success. This finding confirms what Shearer (2006) found regarding parents who oversee instilling moral values, promoting social development and teaching their children the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. This further avers that, parents can impart their children with a moral character that can help them to be active citizens (Badeni et al., 2019; Bhamani, et al., 2020; Collie et al., 2019).

Parents revealed that they provided their children with career counselling. This finding is essential for learners at a young age in making an informed decision that might have a fundamental impact on their employability. The finding supports previous researchers (To et al., 2022; Parola & Marcionetti, 2022) who also established the role of parents in their children's career paths. Consequently, the research supports Epstein's theory in terms of stakeholders that must form part of the decisions made to improve children's academic achievement. Most parents who participated in the study formed part of the school governing bodies (Sibanda, 2021; Republic of South Africa, 1996), which makes them important stakeholders when decisions are made for children's education.

The findings revealed that parents provided their children with emotional support. Drawing on the principle that charity begins at home, this finding is vital for their academic success. For instance, parents indicated that they would always talk to their children to find out if there might be some other things that were affecting their psychosocial development. In this way, the parent-teacher relationship is significant in providing children with emotional support, thus affirming proclamations by Alzahrani et al. (2019) and Collie et al. (2019) who argue that emotional support is essential for learners since it enhances their educational achievement.

Conclusion

The study concludes that parental involvement is crucial for collaboration with schools and assisting children with homework. Collaboration has the potential to improve the relationship between parents and teachers and increase children's academic achievement in Giyani Municipality, Limpopo Province's rural schools.

Parental involvement contributes to their children's academic success despite some of the difficulties parents in the Limpopo Province encounter because of the ongoing curriculum changes. Homework, where parents both help their children with their schoolwork and encourage them to learn to complete it on their own, is one of the two roles that parents play in their children's education. Career counselling is the second role that parents play in their children's education. In this role, parents encourage and counsel their children to follow their passions and make wise career decisions.

Our results have implications for parent-teacher relationships in schools in terms of practice and policy. The findings should motivate education policymakers to create strategies that build on parents' strengths to support their children. They could also encourage a program of continuous improvement that might foster parent-teacher collaboration to enhance the positive development of children in rural schools.

Our study has at least two limitations. Firstly, our results cannot be generalised to reflect parents' perceptions throughout the entire Limpopo Province in South Africa. Indeed, our participants were selected from a single rural area of Giyani Municipality. Our response to this limitation is simple. We had no intention to generalise the findings from the start. Our interest was to explore the views and opinions of selected parents regarding parental involvement in their children's education in specific rural-based schools. The second limitation is the deliberate exclusion of perceptions from students, administrators, and teachers. Note that there are plans to carry out a study that focuses on children's perceptions of their parental involvement.

Following the recommendations from parents, the first intervention workshops have been held to further empower the School Governing Body in parental involvement in the same schools in Giyani Municipality. Nevertheless, we recommend that further research on parental involvement in children's education in our digital age be carried out in other provinces of South Africa, with a particular focus on rural schools and the use of schools.

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Remote Special Educational Consultation in Swedish Rural Schools: Experiences of Special Educators and Class Teachers

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Abstract

With advances in communication technologies, remote special educational consultation has become a promising strategy for indirect special education provision aiming to support students with special educational needs as well as their teachers in remote and rural areas. This study explores how special educators in a rural municipality in Sweden offer remote special educational consultation to teachers and how the two teacher categories experience remote special educational consultation. The empirical data of the study consist of special educators' and teachers' responses to an online questionnaire (N=11). The analysis revealed themes reflecting experienced challenges as well as opportunities. The challenges relate to lack of professional commitment and consensus, lack of school leaders' trust, knowledge and support, and barriers associated with distance and technology, while opportunities relate to increased access to special educational competence, increased structure in consultation and increased professional development and collaboration. The results of this study highlight the potential value of remote special educational consultation as an acceptable, cost-effective, and efficient way of increasing access to special educational expertise and providing special educational support to teachers working in rural and underserved schools.

Keywords: *remote educational consultation, special education, rural school, special educator*

Introduction

Although rural areas and rural schools differ both among and within countries, rural schools often face a range of common constraints, such as geographic isolation, staff shortages and limitations in economic and human resources, available expertise, and professional development opportunities (Bagley & Hillyard, 2011; Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Geographic and other constraints are not the only features of rural schools' situations, which are complex, diverse and socio-politically contested (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022; Hargreaves, 2009). However, associated challenges may hinder rural schools' efforts to meet quality and equality demands and restrict their capacities to support students with diverse learning needs (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Farmer et al., 2018; Lind & Stjernström, 2015). Teachers working in rural schools are in key

positions for supporting all students, particularly students with special educational needs. However, the challenging conditions may affect teachers' opportunities to access professional support enabling high quality learning for students with support needs (Berry, 2012). Although teachers in rural schools have often developed creative solutions out of necessity (Pettersson & Ström, 2019), systematic strategies, resources and sustainable professional development activities for teachers are crucial (Castro et al., 2010; Pettersson et al., 2016).

A well-established support strategy intended to increase teachers' professional competence is 'educational (school) consultation', an umbrella term for various kinds of consultation that occur in a school context (Erchul & Sheridan, 2014). There is extensive research literature on educational consultation, focusing mostly on psychologists and other specialists offering consultation on learning disabilities and behaviour-related challenges to teachers and other school staff (e.g. Erchul & Sheridan, 2014). Educational consultation is an essential element of indirect special education service provision aiming to support students with special educational needs in different educational settings (Idol, 2006). Traditionally, educational consultation was of prescriptive nature, but with the increasing prioritisation of inclusion, a collaborative form of consultation has gained ground in which the special educator played a prominent role (Cook & Friend, 2010). A specific term to describe consultation provided by special educators is special educational consultation. Idol (2006) defines special educational consultation as a form of indirect special education service delivery in which a consulting special educator supports a teacher who has students with special education needs in his or her classroom. Here, we use the term educational consultation to describe consultation in school contexts generally and special educational consultation when referring to the special educators' consulting activities. The term 'special educator' encompasses special education teachers as well as special educational needs coordinators.

Advances in communication technologies and other digital solutions have broadened in-person consultation to distance consultation, which has facilitated service provision and support to remote regions. Distance consultation developed initially in health contexts and gradually spread to psychological and educational settings (Bice-Urbach et al., 2018; Fischer et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic consultation at a distance developed further (Schaffer et al., 2021), with increasing variation in the terminology applied across disciplines. Frequent terms are telehealth, telemedicine, teleconsultation, videoconferencing, technology-mediated consultation, tele-classroom consultation and remote consultation (e.g. Bice-Urbach et al., 2018; Fischer et al., 2018; Saggers et al. 2021). Here, we use the term 'remote educational consultation' to describe the activity in general, and 'remote special educational consultation' (RSEC) when referring to consultation in the context of special education. In line with a previous study (Pettersson & Ström, 2020) we define RSEC as special educators' provision of consultation services with telecommunication technologies to teachers working in rural schools.

Although remote educational consultation has gained ground, studies on RSEC are sparse. Most published studies have focused on the support provided by school psychologists, behaviour specialists and multi professional teams to school staff in addressing students' behaviour related challenges (e.g. Fischer et al., 2018). However, a few studies have addressed consultation services offered to teachers by special educators, either as single consultants or as members of educational teams. Knowles et al. (2017) studied effects of a special educator's behaviour consultation on the classroom climate in a rural school, while Sussman et al. (2022) examined how an educational team including special educators contributed to schools' work with multi-tiered support systems for learning and behaviour. In Sweden, Pettersson and Ström (2017, 2019, 2020) in a three-year project funded by Swedish Special Education Authority investigated how special educators and teachers in a Swedish rural municipality collaborated, how special educators implemented RSEC and to what extent RSEC supported teachers' professional development. The

present study, exploring perceptions and experiences of RSEC is part of this larger project. To contextualise the study, we start by providing a picture of the Swedish rural school context.

The Swedish Rural School Context

Due to demographic and geographic differences across countries, there is no common definition of what constitutes a school in a rural area (Anderson, 2010). This applies for Sweden as well. Different Swedish authorities define rural areas and rural schools differently. Due to lack of common definition, we use rural school characteristics identified by Pettersson (2017) in an empirical study comprising 58 schools from an area covering two thirds of Sweden. The rural school characteristics include location in a sparsely populated municipality (with less than 7 inhabitants per square kilometre and less than 20 000 inhabitants), low number of students (up to 55), long distance to municipality centre (on average 45 minutes by car), financial constraints and few teachers (on average 3.7 teachers) and other professionals such as special educators. Swedish special educators as well as principals working with rural schools work primarily in the municipality centre (Pettersson & Näsström, 2017). This means that teachers in rural schools work under different conditions from their colleagues in urban schools. They have few colleagues, if any, and few students but not fewer pedagogical and special educational challenges (Pettersson & Ström, 2017). Multi-grade teaching is common, and the teachers' work is multi-faceted. The constant threat of school closure and concerns about failure to reach quality standards affect the school staff (Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Pettersson et al., 2016). On the other hand, no findings indicate that rural schools are inferior to urban schools in terms of student performance (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). The environment is usually calm and safe, and the teacher can identify and pay attention to individual students' support needs at an early stage (Pettersson & Ström, 2019). However, despite research indications that the learning environment in rural schools has positive properties, Pettersson and Ström (2019) concluded that teachers working in rural schools need and value support from special educators.

A Collaborative Perspective on Special Educational Consultation

Since the early 1990s, Swedish special educators have been expected to function as consultants to teacher colleagues, principals, parents, and other stakeholders. Although policy documents regulating the work of special educators, (Swedish Code of Statutes SFS, 2007) do not specify the content of consultation or the consultation strategies, they have two main tasks: to give advice and provide services as 'qualified dialogue partners' (Sundqvist et al., 2014). The main objective of the special educators' consulting role is to promote the development of inclusive learning environments by helping teachers to attend to learner diversity (von Ahlefeld Nisser, 2014). The special educators' consulting role has become widely acknowledged (Lindqvist, 2013). However, school staff members' evaluation of consultation varies substantially, with class and subject teachers being less positive than special educators (Lindqvist et al., 2011).

During the last decade, a collaborative consultation model emphasising the importance of professional collaboration between the consulting special educator and the consultee has emerged alongside the traditional consultee-centred and expert driven models (Sundqvist et al., 2014; von Ahlefeld Nisser, 2017). Collaborative consultation is a process-oriented approach based on shared responsibility for finding solutions for pedagogical challenges in the classroom (Friend & Cook, 2013). In this sense, the special educator and the class teacher(s) work collaboratively as a team in planning and providing support for students with special educational needs in inclusive learning environments (King-Sears et al., 2015). Furthermore, collaborative consultation relates to professional development. International research findings indicate that regular and meaningful support, professional collaboration, and supportive teacher relationships seem to promote resilience among teachers who work in rural schools (Castro et al., 2010; Malloy & Allen, 2007). Similarly, a Swedish study on consultation between special educators and teachers working in

rural schools showed that collaborative consultation contributes to teachers' professional development (Pettersson & Ström, 2019). Providing such consultation is challenging in many rural schools, due to the geographical and other constraints, but advances in distance-bridging technologies can offer promising modalities for such services.

Remote Educational and Special Educational Consultation

Remote consultation in school settings was first addressed in literature towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium, focusing primarily on the support school psychologists provided for special education teachers in functional behaviour assessment, analysis and intervention for students with behaviour-related challenges (Fischer et al., 2018). Early studies (e.g. Frieder et al., 2009) showed the potential of remote educational consultation for assessing and treating behaviour-related problems among students and paved the way for further studies, which provided evidence that remote educational consultation was a promising means for providing access to educational services in rural and remote areas (Butcher & Riggleman, 2018; Fischer et al., 2018). Substantial parts of the reported studies on remote educational consultation still address behaviour-related challenges (Fischer et al., 2018; Frederick et al., 2020). However, some studies have addressed other types of disabilities and mental health issues among children and youth, such as autism spectrum disorders (Hall, 2018; Saggers et al., 2021), visual impairments (Ihorn & Arora, 2018), and both depression and anxiety related problems (Margolis et al., 2018). Furthermore, early remote educational consultation-based interventions for young children with disabilities have also received some attention (Butcher & Riggleman, 2018).

Researchers have identified several benefits of remote educational consultation. Ihorn and Arora (2018) claim that it can increase the equality of opportunities while addressing the needs of underserved areas. Other benefits reported are cost-effectiveness as remote educational consultation reduces travel times (Bice-Urbach et al., 2018; Owens et al., 2021; Schultz et al., 2018) and an increase in both capacity building and self-efficacy of teachers working in rural schools (Saggers et al., 2021; Sussman et al., 2022). Furthermore, remote educational consultation promotes inclusion of students with disabilities by increasing professional development opportunities (Saggers et al., 2021). Although most studies seem to support the idea that remote educational consultation is an efficient and acceptable way of offering consultation services in underserved areas (von Hagen et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2018; Schultz et al., 2018), there are concerns and limitations. Most reported concerns seem to relate to the reliability of communication technology, availability of support staff, and users' familiarity with the technology (Bice-Urbach et al., 2018; Rule et al., 2006). Legal, ethical and data security issues are also sources of concern (Butcher & Riggleman, 2018). The severity of the challenges addressed also seems to limit the usefulness of remote consultation (Schultz et al., 2018). Although research findings indicate benefits as well as concerns, Schultz et al. (2018) concluded that remote educational consultation is a promising tool for special needs education provision, provided teachers and consultants are sufficiently familiar with the technological solutions.

Although most of the studies in the field of remote educational consultation relate to special educational needs issues, very few reported studies have focused on special educators' involvement in providing RSEC. However, a few studies where special educators have a prominent role exist. One, by Knowles et al. (2017), investigated use of RSEC to address behaviour-related challenges in a self-contained classroom located in a rural area. The researchers studied how the use of a telehealth consultation model improved the overall climate in the classroom and reduced challenging student behaviour. The aim was to help the class teacher to conduct a behavioural intervention for the students, with the assistance of an experienced special educator specialised in behavioural consultation. The consultation model (10 weeks long) included an initial in-person visit to the site, biweekly observations of teaching sessions via videoconference, implementation of the intervention and biweekly consultation sessions via

Skype. Overall, the disruptive behaviour in the classroom decreased, and the findings indicate that the technology can facilitate service provision in rural areas, increase teacher opportunities to receive direct support for specific needs, and reduce specialists' travel time and costs.

Sussman et al. (2022) report findings from a study on multi-tiered systems providing support for schools' efforts to address learning and behaviour-related challenges via remote consultation. The aim was to examine how well the use of RSEC can promote teachers' self-efficacy in implementing individualised support for students with special educational needs. A consultation team of specialists with expertise in general education, special education and school psychology conducted consultation sessions to the schools. The consultation sessions, conducted via Zoom meeting software, focused mainly on learning difficulties in reading, writing and mathematics. The consultation team discussed specific cases with the participating teachers, asked clarifying questions and gave teaching recommendations. The findings revealed an overall increase in teacher self-efficacy after they attended the consultation sessions, with a positive relationship between number of sessions attended and self-reported self-efficacy.

Focusing on RSEC in a Swedish rural context, Pettersson and Ström (2019, 2020) studied how special educators carried out and implemented RSEC in efforts to support teachers working in rural schools and how teacher support in the form of RSEC promoted professional development of the teachers. The findings showed that the special educators who acted as consultants applied several strategies, such as familiarising themselves with technology, conducting initial in-person site visits and exploiting their special educational competence in the consultation sessions (Pettersson & Ström, 2020). The teachers initially selected the cases for consultation, ranging from behaviour issues to learning challenges. Major conclusions of the studies were that RSEC is a promising strategy for ensuring access to special needs education services for rural schools, promotes rural teachers' professional development, and strengthens professional collaboration between teachers and special educators (Pettersson & Ström, 2019).

The above reported studies have illuminated the potential of remote consultation in providing support for students with special educational needs and their teachers, but little is known about perceptions and experiences of teachers working in rural schools and special educators providing RSEC for them. Thus, the aim of the present study was to obtain such knowledge, by examining the RSEC offered by special educators to teachers working in a rural municipality and the associated experiences of both the teachers and special educators involved. The research question we address is as follows: How do special educators and class teachers perceive and experience RSEC?

Method

The Study Context

The present study is part of a larger municipality-initiated research and development project conducted in the period 2018-2020 in a rural municipality in northern Sweden (Pettersson & Ström, 2017, 2019, 2020). The aim of the project (involving a university, educational authorities and special educators in the municipality) was to develop RSEC in the municipality's four rural schools. The sparsely populated municipality is located in a rural inland part of Sweden. The number of students in the schools ranges from eight to 46 and the number of teachers from one to five. Due to the low numbers of students and teachers, the classes are composed of mixed-age student groups. None of the schools has special educators stationed at the school, but all of them have access to a special educator stationed in the municipality centre. The travelling time by car from the municipality centre to the schools varies from approximately 15 minutes to an hour.

Data Collection and Participants

Empirical data for the study were collected with an online questionnaire that teachers (N=11) and special educators (N=4) associated with the four participating schools were invited to complete in order to capture their perceptions and experiences of RSEC. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions. Ten of the questions were free text questions relating to teachers' and special educators' perceptions and experiences of the ambitions, benefits, challenges, organisation, and contributions of RSEC. Two of the questions had fixed-response options, asking whether RSEC had increased cooperation between the two teacher categories and to what extent the teachers had utilised the content from RSEC in their teaching. In designing the questionnaire, we utilised findings from prior, mainly Swedish, research on RSEC (Pettersson & Ström, 2017, 2019, 2020). The online questionnaire was sent via e-mail to the 11 teachers working in the participating schools and four special educators attached to the schools at the end of the three-year project in mid-June 2020. After two reminders in the autumn, the questionnaire closed in October 2020. The reason for the long response time was that most teachers were on summer holiday from mid-June to the end of August. In total, seven teachers and four special educators answered the questionnaire. Four teachers did not provide responses, probably because three of them were on leave for various reasons and one had moved to another school when the autumn term started. Most of the participating teachers and special educators had had a long professional career, all but one having worked for 10 years or more, most of them in rural schools. All were women and all had a special educator certificate at advanced level.

Data Analysis

The findings presented here are based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of responses to the free text questions, with some support from responses to the fixed answer questions. Thematic analysis is a systematic and flexible method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within a dataset, thereby coherently aggregating the content and facilitating interpretation of relevant elements of the content to addressed topics. In the analysis, we followed the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Prior to the analysis, we read the free text answers repeatedly to familiarise ourselves with the data. During this part of the process, we sorted content embedded in the data in relation to perceptions and experiences. This initial process gave us codes and eventually preliminary themes. The next step was to identify stable themes that reflected the meaning of data related to the research aim. This data-driven analytical process resulted in two overarching thematic structures, *Challenges* and *Opportunities*, each encompassing three inductively derived themes.

Findings

As described above, the thematic analysis resulted in six themes describing the participants' perceptions and experiences of RSEC, three related to each of the two overarching themes: challenges and opportunities. Findings regarding these themes are reported in more detail in the following text, with illustrative quotations from responses of numerically anonymised participants.

Experienced Challenges

The three themes reflecting challenges were lack of professional commitment and consensus, lack of school leaders' trust, knowledge and support and barriers associated with distance and technology. Each of these themes will be described in detail.

Lack of Professional Commitment and Consensus. Some teachers had low expectations regarding RSEC, and thus expressed lack of commitment to new ways of conducting consultation. "*I have no ambition for remote consultation. I think you should work more towards promoting the physical presence of special educators in our rural schools*" (Teacher 2). Other critical comments

related to the insecure situation of the rural school, "*I think the rural schools might end up even more peripheral when the special educators no longer visit us*" (Teacher 3).

The findings further reveal differences in opinions among teachers and special educators regarding special needs education, support provision and consultation, as illustrated by the following statement by a special educator: "*We have not developed a consensus about consultation, and it clearly shows when we special educators assess what kind of support the teacher needs.*" Another aspect related to the lack of consensus concerning the function of consultation, particularly a desire expressed by some of the teachers for more hands-on advice for meeting various learning needs of students. "*I have only got concrete suggestions from the special educator a few times*" (Teacher 6). The following critical comment from one of the teachers reveals not only lack of consensus but also a perceived lack of legitimacy for RSEC. "*In my experience remote consultation has not been successful*" (Teacher 2).

However, some teachers who expressed negative feelings towards RSEC changed their opinion when they became familiar with the new consultation model, as illustrated by the following quotation:

> *In the beginning, the remote consultation felt very artificial because I did not think there was a particular need. However, during this school year the support has been very valuable. The "forced" consultation has given me additional value. I had learnt that using a computer as a communicative aid was not too strange during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we conducted all meetings remotely. We were already used to it (Teacher 5).*

Lack of School Leaders' Trust, Knowledge, and Support. During the implementation of RSEC, the municipality school leader changed. The new school leader was not familiar with RSEC nor committed to continuing the project. This radically changed the conditions and caused frustration among both teachers and special educators. The school leader employed a new special education teacher and assigned her to teach students with special education needs in a segregated setting. Consequently, the whole idea of RSEC was undermined as the students were removed from the regular classroom. Another decision of the new school leader was to assign a counsellor to visit the rural schools regularly and offer consultation. The following statement from one of the special educators (Special educator 4) illustrates the frustration caused by the school leader's actions.

> *One special education teacher was employed to teach students in a resource room and the counsellor conducted school visits on a regular basis with the aim of giving some consultation to the teachers. The counsellor took over part of our ongoing collaboration with the teachers, a collaboration we were developing and improving.*

The participating teachers expressed opinions that the lack of trust, knowledge and support from the school leader created obstacles, and even undermined the development in RSEC that had started. "*If we had a school leader who really believed in the development work and could support and help us, remote consultation would function very well*" *(Teacher 6).* One of the special educators expressed similar views, as follows.

> *The school leader's decision temporarily overturned the whole idea of the development project. It is important that newly appointed school leaders understand the importance of development work, in this case regarding remote consultation. It is equally important for the leader to keep to earlier decisions, instead of making changes that undermine the importance of consultation.*

Barriers Associated with Distance and Technology. Some of the participants expressed unfamiliarity with consulting at a distance, at least in the beginning. Most of the teachers were used to a system involving special educators conducting in-person consultation sessions during school visits. The introduction of RSEC challenged this. Initially, most teachers felt uncomfortable

participating in consultation via computer. Furthermore, the digital meeting platform did not function properly at first. This caused frustration among the teachers. "*It was problematic when the meeting platform did not work as we wanted. Discussing things by phone is not as good as having an application with sound and picture*" (Teacher 5).

After the initial challenges, most of the teachers became accustomed to consultation sessions at distance and seemed to accept the remote provision of regular consultation. "*For me, it was strange to meet via a digital device, it was something I had to get used to and eventually understand the benefits of remote special educational consultation*" (Teacher 7). A few of the teachers remained sceptical. "*Sitting and looking at the person I am discussing things with on a screen still feels constrained*" (Teacher 1).

Experienced Opportunities

The three themes reflecting opportunities were increased access to special educational competence, increased structure in consultation and increased professional development and collaboration. Each of the themes will be described in detail.

Increased Access to Special Educational Competence. Most of the teachers expressed a belief that remote consultation increased access to special educational competence, thereby promoting educational quality and students' learning. When the teachers evaluated RSEC, they referred to their own teaching. "*It [RSEC] has given me more possibilities to give students with special education needs as good instruction as possible*" (Teacher 7). Some teachers reportedly felt that they had more support from the special educator, which had positive impacts on the learning environment, including the overall situation in the classroom, and enhanced their ability to handle challenges. "*Our special educator supports me and takes active responsibility for meetings with guardians and helps me with challenging documents*" (Teacher 1).

Increased Structure in Consultation. During implementation of the RSEC project, the teachers introduced scheduled consultation times, which replaced the earlier system of irregular physical consultation sessions. The teachers could decide how often they wanted consultation, which gave them a sense of control, and in many cases increased their use of consultation. "*Receiving consultation weekly feels too often for me, my aim is to use it every other week and in periods, and weekly if needed. This means that I utilise consultation on a more regular basis than before*" (Teacher 4).

The scheduled consultation times gave the consultation necessary structure. The teachers and special educators had decided together that the teachers should inform the special educators about the topics they wanted to discuss in advance, and that both parties should prepare themselves before each session. "*It is really important for us teachers to prepare ourselves and utilise the scheduled times*" (Teacher 6). The scheduled and structured consultation increased predictability. "*I know that I will receive consultation, and when*" (Teacher 1). Most teachers appreciated the scheduled sessions. "*It is very helpful to know when we can get consultation, and there is always a need*" (Teacher 5).

The structured RSEC also included initial special educator visits to the rural schools. The special educators spent two days in the schools to observe and document individual students, teachers' teaching and the learning environment, then discuss findings with the teachers. Both the teachers and special educators appreciated the procedures during the visits. "*It is important for the special educator to have good knowledge of the rural schools' conditions, learning environments and students*" (Teacher 6). A statement from one of the special educators supports the teacher's view. "*It should be easy for the teacher and me to discuss the teachers' support needs in relation to the students, and in this context my knowledge of the learning environment is essential.*"

Increased Professional Development and Collaboration. The consultation sessions seemed to promote the teachers' professional development. The teachers reported that the

consultation was useful for planning, implementing, and evaluating support for students with special education needs. Illustrative comments supporting this assertion were made by two of the teachers. "*I have used the consultation content when planning, conducting and evaluating my lessons*" (Teacher 3) and "*I have used the advice and support I have got regarding social difficulties among students, in discussions, interventions and adaptations of the learning environment*" (Teacher 4).

The special educators expressed clear goals. "*To get all teachers to utilise the knowledge they obtain through remote consultation is important in order to develop instruction and special needs education*" (Special educator 3). The special educators also indicated that the RSEC project had increased collaboration and changed their way of conducting consultation. Collaborative consultation seemed more common than before. "*I engage to a greater extent than before in a kind of collaborative consultation, I do not only provide ready solutions to accept or reject. It works because we share the same knowledge of the learning environment*" (Special educator 2). The collaboration also changed the teachers' and special educators' ways of talking about and perceiving consultation. Consultation had become a 'discussion' or 'dialogue' between two professionals, rather than a session in which a consultant offered advice to a consultee. The focus of consultation shifted from the students' special educational needs to the teachers' professional competence. "*The consultation I have received has strongly contributed to my work functioning better than before*" (Teacher 7). Furthermore, the collaborative approach within RSEC seemed to have enhanced the teachers' ability to reflect. "*The collaboration in remote consultation has contributed to a more reflective and analytical way of working*" (Teacher 4).

The greater collaboration had promoted consensus among the participating teachers and created a sense of capacity and working towards the same goal, i.e., improvement of the teaching and learning for all students. However, this required a shared knowledge and understanding of RSEC and the possibilities it can offer throughout the whole school community. "*Consensus and clarity throughout the whole organisation are important*" (Special educator 2).

Discussion

Findings of our investigation of teachers' and special educators' perceptions and experiences of RSEC in schools in a rural municipality in Sweden reveal several challenges as well as opportunities. Some of the challenges relate to the implementation of digital solutions, which replaced the previous in-person consultation. Remote provision of the service necessitated a completely new way of carrying out consultation. This involved use of a digital platform, which did not function satisfactorily initially, causing uncertainty and frustration among the participants. This confirms previous findings highlighting the importance of educating and preparing those who are supposed to implement new technology (Bice-Urbach et al., 2018; Pettersson & Ström, 2020; Rule et al., 2006). Technical support is also crucial. However, in line with Schultz et al. (2018) the results indicate that the technological barriers decrease when the users become familiar with the distance-bridging technology.

The initial challenges were also visible in the teachers' professional commitment and consensus. Some of the teachers reported negative experiences and did not see the benefits of RSEC. Our interpretation is that the teachers' previous negative experiences of consultation affected their views of RSEC. The previous system with in-person consultation had often been irregular, unplanned, unstructured, and mostly involved 'quick-fix' and unreflecting measures, which hindered collaboration and development of consensual views on how best to support students with special education needs (Pettersson & Ström, 2019). The new school leader's attempts to discourage implementation of RSEC further increased the difficulties in implementing a new system. These results indicate that implementation of new ways of working require thorough preparation, broad acceptance, and support from school leaders. Sensitivity to the teachers'

experiences and needs is also essential, so the design and scope of RSEC helps them to support individual students and develop an inclusive learning environment.

The experienced opportunities relate to benefits for the teachers of improvements in access to special educational competence, structure, capacity, and collaboration. The original goal of the RSEC project was to promote rural teachers' opportunities to get special educational support in a more structured way. In terms of increasing access to the special educators' expertise, RSEC seemed to be successful corroborating earlier findings regarding the potential utility of remote educational consultation (Butcher & Riggleman, 2018; Fischer et al., 2018; von Hagen et al., 2021). A factor that contributed to its success was that the collaboratively planned and scheduled consultation sessions seemed to overcome some flaws of the previous system with occasional in-person consultation. Another was that initial visits to the rural schools complemented the scheduled and structured consultation sessions. These results indicate that a well-planned combination of RSEC and in-person consultation is important for good results. Previous research on RSEC supports this claim (Knowles et al., 2017; Pettersson & Ström, 2020).

Most participating teachers seemed to appreciate RSEC for enhancing their professional development, collaboration between the teachers and special educators, and consensus regarding consultation strategies and support for students with special education needs. The possibility to engage in consultation on a regular basis gave them a sense of mastery regarding their own teaching and their students' learning. Earlier studies (Pettersson & Ström, 2019; Saggers et al., 2021; Sussman et al., 2022) have also indicated that remote educational consultation sessions can increase teachers' self-efficacy. Furthermore, Sussman et al. (2022) found a positive relationship between the number of sessions attended and self-efficacy, corroborating the importance of regular RSEC sessions for teachers' self-efficacy and professional development.

An interesting finding was that RSEC seemed to increase both the degree and quality of collaboration between the teachers and special educators. The teachers and special educators developed a kind of collaborative consultation, characterised by equal relationships and acknowledgement of each other's professional expertise (cf. Sundqvist et al., 2014). Regular consultation sessions and shared ambitions seem to foster collaborative consultation, which is likely to improve the quality of special needs education in rural schools (Pettersson & Ström, 2017). However, mutual understanding of the purpose of RSEC and greater collaboration is not enough to develop special needs education in rural schools. The results highlight the importance of consensus, not only between teachers and special educators, but also throughout the whole school organisation. Without committed support from the leadership, it is probably more challenging to develop inclusive forms of special needs education in rural and other underserved areas (cf. Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that teachers and special educators working in rural schools perceive RSEC as an acceptable, cost-effective, and efficient way of increasing access to special educational expertise and special educational support provision support in rural and underserved schools. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of remote special educational consultation seems to foster professional collaboration. However, there are several requirements that need to be considered, including mutual understanding and decision-making, leadership support, thorough preparation, planning and removal of technological challenges regarding software. To conclude, RSEC has a potential value, but it is naïve to think that remote consultation can replace in-person consultation completely. This study complements earlier research on remote special educational consultation, but more research is needed before we can establish pros and cons of remote special educational consultation.

Limitations

The study presented here has several limitations. The sample was small, consisting of teachers and special educators of schools in a single Swedish rural municipality. Although Swedish rural schools share many contextual characteristics, it is not possible to generalise results, even across Sweden. Rural municipalities' organisation of special educational consultation varies. Furthermore, the study reports findings from a certain remote special educational consultation project, initiated by the focal municipality and special educators, who favoured the initiative, and the on-line questionnaire used to collect data does not provide in-depth data. However, despite these constraints, the results provide some potentially illuminating insights into teachers' and special educators' perceptions and experiences of consultation support at a distance as well as for the need for continuity and a sustainable approach.

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"We Need to Run Our Own Communities": Creating the Wuyagiba Bush Uni in Remote Southeast Arnhem Land, Northern Australia

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Abstract

Australian Indigenous student participation rates in higher education are consistently lower than non-Indigenous students, especially in remote contexts. This has manifested in the usurpation of remote Aboriginal community control by 'more qualified' external staff. Here we present a reflexive assessment of the development, delivery, outcomes and challenges of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni that was designed to address the paucity of university education in remote Aboriginal communities of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. From 2018 to 2022, 66 Indigenous students graduated with Wuyagiba Micro-credentials (accredited by Macquarie University), and 28 students proceeded to enrol in Bachelor level degrees at Macquarie University in Sydney, with the first graduate in 2023. Furthermore, the Wuyagiba model has created a successful remote Indigenous business that employs about 50 local Indigenous people annually and is working towards empowering endogenous community development in remote Arnhem Land. Nevertheless, many challenges remain including sustainable funding, remote service delivery, university and bureaucratic structural barriers, and lateral violence in remote communities. Several enabling factors of success are identified, such as the cross-cultural curriculum, strong Indigenous control and leadership, wrap-around support, and longstanding relationships between University staff and community leaders. Such reflections can be used by other remote Aboriginal communities who wish to replicate this model or create their own on-Country higher education programs to empower locally trained leaders of the future.

Introduction

International Indigenous Higher Education Context

Globally, there is continuing disparity between higher education attainment levels of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, especially in nations colonised recently by Europeans such as the Americas, New Zealand, Africa and Australia (Jefferies et al., 1998; Kaya & Seleti, 2014; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Smith et al., 2017). There is significant literature arguing that Western higher education systems have failed to provide an environment and curricula that champion Indigenous cultures and Indigenous inclusion (Hauser et al., 2009; Nakata, 2013). There is immense pressure for Indigenous students to either conform to Western standards of higher education which can compromise or conflict with cultural identity and practice (Champagne, 2015). This situation has persisted despite many international agreements and declarations, such as the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations, 2007) and *The Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous People's Rights in Education* (1999) (WIPCE International Council, 2023). These Declarations acknowledge the self-determining right of Indigenous peoples to access equitable education, practice culture, lead and make decisions regarding their own futures, and the fundamental right to be Indigenous. Despite a significant improvement in the equitable participation of Indigenous students on the International scale, research suggests that policies and practices of universities have continued to limit participation and somewhat deter Indigenous people, compromising the expression and practice of Indigenous language, culture and associated identity (Wooltorton et al., 2022).

Contemporary Indigenous student teaching methods in higher education are generally built on Western ideologies and pedagogies, assuming Indigenous students learn the same way as non-Indigenous students (El Zoghbi, 2008). However, traditional Indigenous learning typically involves intergenerational oral transfer methods including collaboration, storytelling and song; in-situ problem solving; and practical, holistic and experiential learning processes which are often not conducive to Western university paradigms (Bat & Shore, 2013; Hooley, 2002; Van Gelderen, 2019; Wooltorton et al., 2022). Culturally responsive teaching is a well-known international pedagogical approach that demonstrates how teachers and curricula can be modified to empower multicultural students and enhance student outcomes, particularly in colonised nations where Indigenous peoples and cultures are oppressed. Gay (2018) offers five principles of culturally responsive theory: a strong knowledge base about cultural diversity, culturally relevant curricula, high academic expectations for all students while validating their cultural identity, and an appreciation for different communication styles.

Australian Indigenous Higher Education Context

In Australia, congruent with the international setting, provision of socially inclusive, equitable education has long been seen as pivotal to addressing the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people (Hunter & Schwab, 2003). Since the 1980s, there have been many Australian policies aimed at improving Indigenous social inclusion and equity in education (Australian Government, 1989, 2015; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; Council of Australian Governments, 2008; Hook & Jessen, 2022; Price, 2012). Between 2008 and 2012 a string of reviews reflected on these policies, aiming to steer Indigenous higher education participation toward parity with non-Indigenous participation (Behrendt et al., 2012; Bradley et al., 2008; Hook & Jessen, 2022). Despite this, Indigenous student participation and completion rates remain well below those of non-Indigenous students, and cultural values continue to be undermined (Universities Australia, 2023; Wooltorton et al., 2022). In 2021, student

enrolment and participation data revealed that of the students studying at an Australian university, only 2.08% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Universities Australia, 2023).

In addition to reduced participation, Indigenous higher education students reported the compounding challenges of: conflicting non-Indigenous social and cultural values; detachment from kinship structures; language barriers; financial pressures; health problems; ongoing racism and prejudice; and living away from Country (ancestral estates) (Vass, 2012). Proportionally, more Indigenous people live in remote parts of Australia than their non-Indigenous counterparts: 1% in major cities and 32% in remote or very remote areas (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). Therefore, it stands to reason that higher education opportunities on-Country in remote Australia could increase access for remote students and remove the adverse effects of leaving communities, whilst allowing students to meet cultural obligations and maintain cultural connectedness (Kinnane et al. 2014; Van Gelderen 2017). Successful 'two-way' on-Country programs have incorporated the strengths of both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and methods, challenging hegemonic systems to better support Indigenous learners (Hauser et al., 2009; Van Gelderen, 2017).

Australian Two-Way on-Country Higher Education Models

Australian University and government supported 'Away from Base' higher education programs have offered culturally attuned mixed mode (on-Country, on campus) Bachelor degree offerings for remote and regional Indigenous students since the 1990s (Australian Government, 2018). 'Away From Base' programs were primarily associated with Certificate level qualifications, and to a lesser extent, supported students studying university degrees, with a strong focus on Health, Education and Society (Social Compass, 2021). The success of this program in supporting Aboriginal Teachers to gain university-level teaching qualifications is exemplified by the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education *'Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education'* (RATE) Program (White, 2005) and Charles Darwin University *'Growing Our Own'* program (2009-2020) (Van Gelderen, 2017). Other 'Away from Base' degrees include the Bachelor of Midwifery (Australian Catholic University, 2010-present; Shulz et al., 2018) and Bachelor of Community Management (*Macquarie University, 1992--2013*).

The *'Away from Base'* model supports students to remain on-Country whilst studying at home or online, combined with residential face-to-face study blocks on campus. This model supports students in gaining contextual and practical professional experience at the 'cultural interface', while strengthening Indigenous identity (Nakata, 2007). This successful needs-based program facilitated the graduation of hundreds of Indigenous university students and supported local community aspirations of learning on-Country. However, today, with the rise of online study, the *'Away from Base'* model increasingly requires digital literacy, a computer and internet access. This model demonstrably works for some students, although the digital divide has further reduced higher education access for students that don't have such capability, especially in remote and regional areas, evidenced by the persistent disparity on Indigenous higher education statistics (Social Compass 2021; Thomas et al., 2017).

Despite delivering strong outcomes over many decades, most of these programs had relatively low enrolment numbers compared to other university degrees and have now ceased due to the economic rationalisation of the university sector, the rise of online study options, and other political and institutional constraints (Van Gelderen, 2017; White, 2005). The closure of many of these programs left a gap in culturally attuned on-Country higher education options in remote Australia. This left remote Aboriginal communities looking for new programs, partners and funding to reinstate higher education access and develop the capacity of future local community leaders.

In 2018 two on-Country Higher Education offerings independently emerged in response to Indigenous community pressure: The Nowanup Bush Uni, run by Curtin University; and the Wuyagiba Study Hub (Bush Uni) run by the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation (the Corporation) in partnership with Macquarie University. The Nowanup Bush Uni offers an on-Country facility where local Elders deliver culturally meaningful content to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Johnston & Forrest, 2020). This paper presents a critical reflection on the development, challenges, lessons learned and enabling factors from the Wuyagiba Study Hub.

Methodologies

Building on the experiences of other two-way on-Country remote education models described above, the Wuyagiba Study Hub, known as the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, was developed by Elders and families of the remote Aboriginal community of Ngukurr in southeast Arnhem Land, in partnership with Macquarie University staff. The aim of this paper is to provide a critical self-evaluation of the program (2018-2022), offering insights for others interested in developing new culturally attuned two-way higher education programs on-Country in remote Australia. Culturally responsive historical and ethnographic research methodologies were adopted to reflect on the development, delivery, challenges, lessons learned and enabling factors in relation to the four initial Bush Uni objectives:

Objective 1. Close the 35-year University degree attainment gap for local Aboriginal people;

Objective 2. Provide on-Country higher education;

Objective 3. Create a two-way higher education model; and

Objective 4. Foster the next generation of local leaders to facilitate endogenous development.

To explore progress against these aims, this paper is positioned reflexively from the authors' perspective. The content of this paper is the result of many conversations between authors Dr Kevin Rogers, Dr Helen Rogers and Mrs Annette Daniels, who are all from Ngukurr community, in collaboration with Macquarie University Associate Professor Dr Emilie Ens, Cultural Advisor Sue Pinckham and Associate Lecturer Andréa Jaggi. The paper was typed up, contextualised with the international and national literature, and embedded into a culturally responsive and critical reflective framework by authors Jaggi and Ens.

To understand the program context, we first present a 'case study' overview of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni. Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2012) argued that case studies are an essential component of educational research, answering questions surrounding "contexts, relationships, processes and practices" (p. 23). An understanding of the key individuals, locations and program development forms a contextual foundation for critically reflexive evaluation. In conjunction, a culturally responsive methodology, using historical and ethnographic methods, was used to articulate the program development and processes while ensuring that contributing communities and people are honoured and respected (Berryman et al., 2013). The purpose of the Bush Uni and this paper is not to change the expression or intent of Indigenous knowledges or practices as they currently exist within the region, but instead to privilege and strengthen the sustainability of Indigenous knowledges and culture, as strongly directed by the Indigenous program leaders and authors.

# Case Study of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni

How it Started

Ngandi Elder, Dr Cherry Wulumirr Daniels OAM (now deceased), and Warndarrang Elder, Dr Kevin Guyurruyurru Rogers (hereafter referred to as Dr Daniels and Dr K Rogers), were two of five local Aboriginal people to complete their Bachelor of Arts in Education through the Deakin-Batchelor Institute RATE program in the mid-late 1980s (McTaggart, 1987). Dr K Rogers became the first Aboriginal Principal in the Northern Territory and Dr Daniels became the founder of the Yugul Mangi Women Rangers, Ngukurr Language Centre and key instigator of the South East Arnhem Land Indigenous Protected Area and Ngukurr *Yangbala* (Young People's) Project (Daniels et al., 2022). Fast forward 30 years to 2018, there were no further university graduates from Ngukurr community. Most of the '*big jobs in town*' were held by outsiders (Daniels et al., 2022). In their late 60s, Dr Daniels with Dr K Rogers and his wife Alawa Elder Dr Helen Rogers recognised the profound need to turn around these statistics and activate the self-determination and autonomy of their people. The proposed solution: a two-way higher education institution on-Country—the Wuyagiba Bush Uni.

Wuyagiba: Geography and Socio-Economic Profile

Wuyagiba is a remote outstation located approximately 120km and 100km from the remote Indigenous communities of Ngukurr and Numbulwar, respectively, in southeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Figure 1). Wuyagiba is part of the ancestral estate of the Warndarrang speaking people of the Numamurdirdi Mambali tribe (semi-moiety). Dr K Rogers and his siblings are Senior Traditional Owners (Minggirringgi) of Wuyagiba, as are Dr Daniels' children, including Ms Annette Daniels, co-author of this paper.

In 1908, many people from southeast Arnhem Land were coerced from their ancestral estates into the Roper River Mission, located near present day Ngukurr community (Sandefur, 1985). This resulted in great loss of traditional knowledge, including the languages of the area, which are now either no longer spoken or are at great risk of being lost (Dickson, 2016).

Figure 1: *Map of Southeast Arnhem Land Showing Language Groups, Location of Wuyagiba and the Nearest Aboriginal Communities of Ngukurr and Numbulwar.*
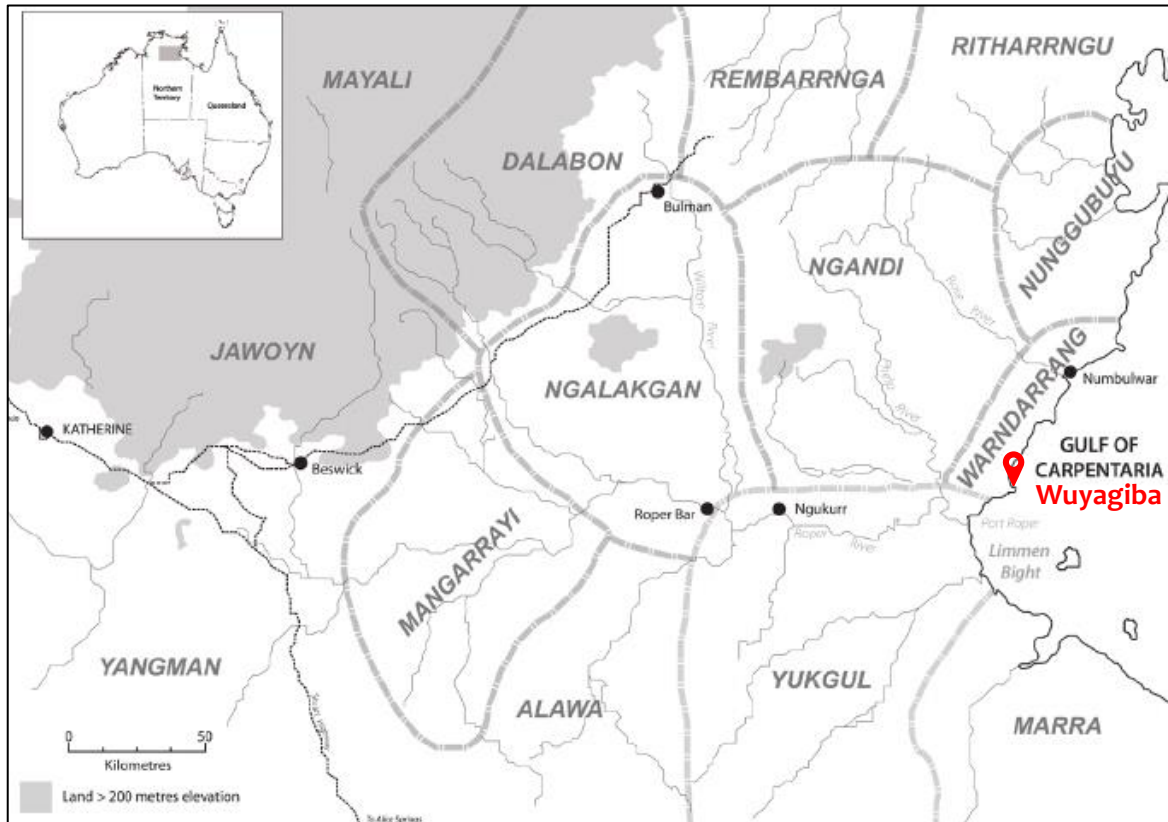
Note: Adapted from Daniels et al., (2012), map used with permission from Federation Press and designer Brett Baker

The development of Wuyagiba as an 'outstation' occurred during the outstation/Homelands movement of the 1970s, with buildings and remote infrastructure established to encourage the return of Indigenous family groups to their ancestral estates (Commonwealth of Australia 1987; Kerins, 2010). Today, the outstations of southeast Arnhem Land are largely used transiently by residents of Ngukurr and Numbulwar and the infrastructure is largely derelict and outdated.

Ngukurr was, and remains, the largest catchment for Wuyagiba Bush Uni enrolments and employment. Ngukurr is a very remote Australian Aboriginal community, with about 1,100 people, of which: over 92% identify as Indigenous; about half are younger than 25; and there are relatively low Year 12 attainment levels compared to the Australia-wide figures (Table 1). In 2016, university-level study was well below, and unemployment much greater than Australia wide indices (Table 1), yet the 2021 data indicated an improvement in these statistics (discussed further in Outcomes and Challenges) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016, 2021).

Table 1. *Census Statistics of Ngukurr Community and Australian Comparisons*

Statistic	Ngukurr 2016	Ngukurr 2021	Australia 2016	Australia 2021
Population	1,149	1,088	23,401,892	25,422,788
Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People	93.4	92.2	2.8	3.2
Percentage unemployment	28.3	23.4	6.9	5.1
Percentage of population under 25	52.6	50.3	31.5	30.1
Percentage of population with Year 12 as highest educational attainment	6.2	10	15.7	14.9
Percentage of population studying at a tertiary (university) level	0.8	3.8	16.1	15.4

Note: Adapted from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016, 2021).

Wuyagiba Bush Uni Development

The Bush University concept came from Dr Daniels and her interactions with the Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network (ARPNet) of Charles Darwin University. At ARPNet, Dr Daniels and other leaders from Arnhem Land talked about setting up bush universities to teach local Indigenous knowledge at the highest level, not only to local people, but potentially for outsiders to also learn and pay for (and therefore generate income). The term Indigenous knowledge does not simply refer to what Indigenous people know about Country and culture, and instead relates to the complex 'holistic cultural practices' of being, knowing and doing (Nakata, 2007).

In 2018, representatives of the Ngukurr Yangbala (Young people) Rangers attended The Nature Conservancy's Women's Leadership Workshop in Brisbane, where Dr Daniels' vision for a bush university was transferred into a tangible plan for a trial (Daniels et al., 2022). The plan was developed by a contingent of Ngukurr Yangbala Rangers and Associate Professor Dr Emilie Ens from Macquarie University. Dr Daniels nominated Mrs Regina Rogers (Dr K and H Rogers' daughter) to take her place at this meeting as she was not well enough to travel.

When deciding on a location for the program, Wuyagiba outstation was best-fit. About two hours drive from Ngukurr, the remote location limits 'humbug' and distractions, allowing students and staff to focus on their study and employment. 'Humbug' is a term commonly used by Aboriginal communities, referring to consistent demands relating to sharing and cultural obligations between kin. In the modern context, humbug can be a considerable stressor for Aboriginal people who are trying to become financially independent by engaging in employment and removing themselves from welfare (Nagel & Thompson, 2010). As co-author Dr H Rogers stated: *"[we] want to move away from community because of humbug and distractions from families. Too much fighting and drug and alcohol abuse in community. Otherwise, they won't be able to concentrate." (Personal communication, September 11, 2022).*

In 2018, key Minggirringgi (Traditional Owners) and Jungayi (Land Managers) agreed to trial a Bush Uni at Wuyagiba (Figure 2). The trial was made possible with the financial and in-kind support of Macquarie University and The Nature Conservancy, supplemented by crowd-sourced funding. The trial involved a five-week two-way preparation course designed to develop students' university-level skills. A small EcoStructures© glamping tent was built by local families and Macquarie University staff and served as a makeshift classroom where students would undertake cultural and academic classes (Figure 3). During the trial, the Australian Government announced the *Regional Study Hub* program to establish community-owned study hubs across regional and remote Australia. After community and University consultation, the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation was formed to take advantage of this opportunity. With in-kind

assistance from Macquarie University partners, the Corporation applied and was successful in obtaining funding. The Australian Government Department of Education and Training's *Regional Study Hub* program provided the Corporation with $2.5million in funding to deliver the Wuyagiba Bush Uni program over four years (2019-2022). This allowed for the development of facilities, including additional EcoStructures© tents as classroom and office spaces, student dormitories, staff accommodation and the construction of an open-air kitchen (Figure 3).

Figure 2: *Photos of the Initial Meeting of Wuyagiba Minggirringgi and Jungayi with Macquarie University Staff About the Proposed Wuyagiba Bush University and Establishment of the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation, Guluman Centre, Ngukurr (May 2018).*

Images: Emilie Ens

Governance of the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation

The Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation was established and registered through the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations in 2018. The Corporation is run by a Board of four Directors who have local cultural authority for Wuyagiba outstation (Minggirringgi and Jungayi) and have experience working on corporation boards. Dr K Rogers (Minggirringgi) remains the Chairman and Cultural Professor of the Corporation, supported by Ngukurr Community leaders and Corporation Directors Bobby Nunggumajbarr (Jungayi), Walter Rogers (Minggirringgi) and Karen Rogers (Jungayi). Directors were supported by the Leadership Team of Dr H Rogers (Cultural Professor), Annette Daniels (Minggirringgi and Cultural Teacher), Associate Professor Dr Emilie Ens (Macquarie University Lead and Administrator) and Sue Pinckham (Macquarie University Cultural Advisor). This governance structure comprising of Directors and the Leadership Team provided a strong foundation for equitable and authoritative decision making, ensuring the programs sustainability, cultural credibility, and academic rigour. All Corporation staff are governed by the Board of Directors, and two Sessional Academics were employed by Macquarie University (through a Commonwealth Supported Place arrangement of the Regional Study Hub program) to deliver academic units and support the delivery of the cultural units by local Cultural Professors.

Figure 3. *Stages of Infrastructure Development from the Shell Classroom (2018, Left), to Dorms and Expanded Classroom (2019, Right).*

Images: Emilie Ens

Curriculum Development

In 2019, local Elders, Minggirringgi, Jungayi and key staff worked closely with Macquarie University staff in Sydney to develop a new cultural unit that was at the level of a first-year University subject: ENVS1500 *South East Arnhem Land Caring for Country and Culture*. They identified 10 key topics that they wanted their youth to learn about, one per week (see Table 2). They proposed: local cultural identity, history, plants and animals, bush medicine, weaving, water, seasons, burning practices, languages and tool making. The lessons were designed around these topics with a focus on lectures that would be delivered by themselves and local experts (such as from the Art Centre, Language Centre, Rangers), combined with field-based practical components undertaken on-Country around Wuyagiba (Table 2). To solidify the content for repeatability and consistency, The Nature Conservancy provided funding for the adaptation of this knowledge into a textbook, prompting and facilitating the recording and maintenance of local traditional knowledges.

In 2021, out at Wuyagiba, the local Cultural Teachers worked with Wiradjuri woman and Macquarie University staff member, Renee Cawthorne, to develop a second Wuyagiba cultural unit: ENVS1501 *Indigenous Science,* again at the level of a first-year university subject. This unit critically explored Indigenous scientific knowledge systems from across Australia, including Arnhem Land, and how they connect to or are different to Western notions of science and Indigenous practices of biology, archaeology, hydrology, medicine, agriculture, astronomy, climate change and fire management (Table 2).

In 2021, the two cultural units were recognised formally and accredited as first-year university subjects through Macquarie University under a Memorandum of Understanding between the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation, Macquarie University Faculty of Science and Engineering and Macquarie University Indigenous Student Engagement Unit, Walanga Muru. The units were also created with the potential for non-Indigenous students to one day undertake them. In line with Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property protocols, and recognised by the Macquarie University Memorandum of Understanding, the units and textbook content remain the property of the Corporation and the Indigenous knowledge providers.

In 2021, the new cultural units were paired with existing, locally adapted, first-year Macquarie University 'academic units' to create two micro-credential qualifications accredited through Macquarie University: Wuyagiba Bush Uni Program 1 and 2 (Table 2). Students could use these qualifications to obtain Recognition of Prior Learning towards a bachelor degree, equating to one semester of full-time study. Alternatively, students could conduct one or both micro-credentials to gain skills for employment in the community or undertake further study elsewhere.

Table 2. *Unit Outlines of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni Program 1 and 2 Micro-credentials.*

Week	Wuyagiba Bush Uni Program 1		Wuyagiba Bush Uni Program 2	
	ENVS1500	**ACOM1001**	**ENVS1501**	**ENVS1000**
1	Cultural Identity	Introduction	Indigenous Archaeology	Introduction
2	Local History	Reading Skills and Functional Grammar	Indigenous Biology	Writing and Referencing
3	Hunting and Animals	Academic Integrity	Indigenous Hydrology	Environmental Observation and Recording
4	Bush Medicine and Bush Tucker Plants	Voice and Paraphrasing	Indigenous Agriculture	Problem Solving and Teamwork
5	Burning Country	Interpreting Assessments	Indigenous Fire Management	Feedback and Reflection
	One week break			
6	Learning Journeys	Newspaper Writing	Indigenous Engineering	Mapping Skills
7	Ceremony	Writing for Different Audiences	Indigenous Medicine	Data Analysis
8	Weaving	Introduction to Essay Writing	Indigenous Astronomy and Cosmology	Professionalism
9	Freshwater Country	Expressing Academic Voice	Indigenous Environmental Management	Resume Development
10	Saltwater Country	Developing an e-Potfolio	Indigenous Climate Change Knolwedges	Final Exam

Positive Outcomes and Benefits

The Wuyagiba Bush Uni has been featured each year since its inception in the Australian Government's 'Closing the Gap' reports (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). The program continues to be developed by local stakeholders, revolutionising two-way higher education on-Country in Arnhem Land. Furthermore, the Bush Uni has also become a successful business that supports Indigenous employment and endogenous community development.

Student Participation

Since 2018, the Wuyagiba Bush Uni has had 126 enrolments (aged 18-65yrs), mostly women, in its higher education courses on-Country (Figure 4). Of these, 66 completed one or more units. Failure to complete was due to several factors, including family commitments (n=7), employment commitments (n=6), health issues (n=5), Sorry Business (n=3) and other factors (n=37), which are outside the scope of this paper and will be the subject of further research.

Initially, enrolments were only open to Aboriginal students from Wuyagiba's nearest communities where the Wuyagiba land-owning families mainly lived: Ngukurr and Numbulwar. In 2021, under guidance from the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation board and cultural leaders, enrolments were opened to students from other communities across Arnhem Land including Gunbalanya, Warruwi, Maningrida, Gapuwiyak, Groote Eylandt, Barunga, Jilkminggan, Minyerri, and Urapunga, as well as Katherine, central Australia, and Cape York.

At Wuyagiba, students are supported by Elders, Minggirringgi, Jungayi, Corporation staff (n=55) and Indigenous and non-Indigenous Macquarie University staff (n=4), both culturally and academically, to build skills to a level required to undertake further study or return to community and gain or enter local employment. Factors enabling success are described below.

Recently released census data for Ngukurr community showed an increase in employment and higher education statistics (Table 1). We acknowledge correlation does not necessarily indicate

causation; however, there has been a clear increase in the percentage of people from Ngukurr community studying at a tertiary (university) level and a clear reduction in unemployment rates since the Wuyagiba Bush Uni trial in 2018 (Table 1).

Figure 4. *Summary of Wuyagiba Bush Uni Enrolments (n=126) and Associated Completions (n=66) by Session and Year (Male, Female, Non-Binary).*
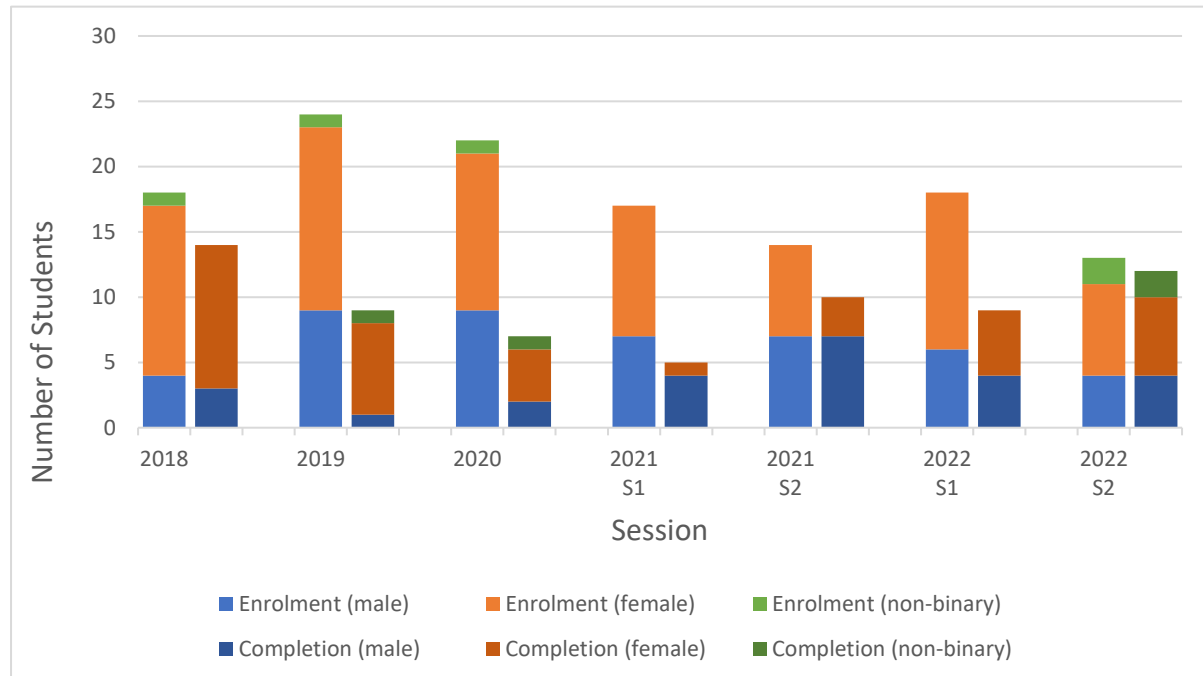
Through culturally responsive and adaptive development, with wrap-around pastoral support for students (described further below in Enabling Factors for Success p.16), the Wuyagiba Bush Uni has produced university-ready students. Throughout the initial program period (2019-2022), 28 students pursued further study at Macquarie University in a range of bachelor degrees including business, linguistics, education, performing arts, creative writing, environmental management, and Indigenous studies. In 2023, a primary objective of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni was achieved as Wuyagiba-supported student Melissa Wurramarrba (from Ngukurr/Groote Eylandt) graduated from Macquarie University. After completing a Bachelor of Arts (Education), Melissa returned to the community to become the first bachelor-level graduate in 35 years.

Community members observed returning Wuyagiba Bush Uni graduates and Macquarie University students actively engaging in culturally meaningful programs, employment, leadership roles and becoming new powerful voices and role models for their community. This has immense positive flow on effects for school attendance and education participation in general, providing evidence-based encouragement for other Aboriginal people to achieve their goals. As highlighted by the Australian Government funded report on *The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students into Higher Education*, "*You can't be what you can't see*" (Kinnane et al. 2014).

Additionally, many students have used the Wuyagiba micro-credentials to further their employment prospects. For example, Keziah Miller (from Ngukurr/Bulman), Wuyagiba Bush Uni graduate and Macquarie University student, returned to the community in 2022 and became the first Indigenous Coordinator of the Ngukurr Language Centre—a role that up until then was previously held by non-Indigenous-linguists. Other students have used skills gained to become Police Aboriginal Liaison Officers, Homeland Teachers, managers, and recognised leaders of their communities. Higher education levels and resultant increased employment opportunity can raise community development aspirations, autonomy, and self-determination, breaking the vicious

welfare dependency cycle present within many remote communities (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010).

Advancing Two-Way Education and Curricula

Curriculum development followed a culturally responsive, collaborative and iterative process between Directors, Elders, Minggirringgi, Jungayi, key staff, community organisations and Macquarie University representatives. The accredited and purpose designed Wuyagiba micro-credentials privileged local cultural knowledges, alongside academic units, and echoed the identified needs of surrounding communities for skilled, confident graduates that could take on local leadership roles. This form of 'bottom-up' higher education curriculum development is not common in Australian Universities, especially since the loss of many 'Away from Base' offerings.

The cultural units were designed to be stand-alone and delivered by respected local knowledge holders, ensuring that traditional knowledges were un-compromised yet still accredited and in line with the academic units. Cultural teachers were paid the same hourly rates as the Academic teachers. The inclusion of locally taught cultural units and on-Country practical experiences were intentionally designed to be congruous with Indigenous ways of learning and doing (Figure 5). Strengthened cultural knowledge and pride in students (and staff!) led to increased student confidence and understanding of their cultural relationships and responsibilities according to local Aboriginal worldviews and kinship systems.

The curriculum also reflected local aspirations for enhanced English literacy, numeracy, computer skills, confidence in communicating English with non-Indigenous people, and walking in 'both worlds' (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) (akin to the cultural interface of Nakata, 2007). These skills will also equip students to undertake further study if they choose and are embedded into the curriculum in line with the two-way philosophy.

The two-way, on-Country Wuyagiba Bush Uni model deployed culturally responsive andragogy (adult education), acknowledging the contextual, culturally embedded strengths and needs of its learners. Concepts of decolonisation, community development, white privilege, racism, lateral violence, language revitalisation and self-determination were explored. These were 'big words' and ideas that many students had not previously spoken or consciously discussed but have experienced or witnessed in their lifetimes. Inclusion of these topics was designed to inspire and empower students and staff to commit to their education, make systemic and transformative change and contribute to endogenous development of their communities.

Figure 5. *Cultural Course Delivery: Students Hear from Elder Heather Ponto About Traditional Bush Medicine (Left) and Participate in Field Trips On-Country with Minggirringgi Annette Daniels (Right).*

Images: Andréa Jaggi

Maintenance of Indigenous Cultural Knowledge and Language

From our observations as teachers and mentors, the delivery and content of these units had observable social benefits for students, staff and surrounding communities in the promotion and maintenance of intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer, instilling cultural pride and confidence in all involved. In his now 46-year-old paper, Dr K Rogers (1977) acknowledged the belonging and connectedness that Aboriginal people feel when they understand culture, moiety, language, and Country. These elements are still important, if not more so, today given the pervasive impact of digital technologies and globalisation of cultures. Hauser et al., (2009) and Kinnane et al., (2014) also acknowledged the importance of including Indigenous knowledge in tertiary education, concluding that an Indigenised andragogy can increase Indigenous student representation.

As a linguistically complex region (Dickson, 2016), several languages were taught as part of the curriculum, including Warndarrang, Marra, Wubuy, Ngandi, Ngalakan, Alawa, Ritharrngu, Rembarrnga and the *lingua franca* Kriol (see language group regions in Figure 1). As many of these languages were considered critically endangered, severely endangered or sleeping, teaching and practice are contributing to their reawakening (Dickson, 2016). This is another topic outside the scope of this paper; however, we have noted that having these languages in the local higher education curriculum is congruous to efforts in local schools, which are also working to better integrate local Indigenous languages in formal classes, despite the absence of strong Northern Territory bilingual education policy. Oldfield (2023) argued that the recent neglect of bilingual education in the Northern Territory education system, following a revival period in the 1970s to late 1990s, has contributed to the social and economic dysfunction in remote Aboriginal communities.

Further to local language teaching, students from other language groups were encouraged to share their languages and knowledge, and various local community organisations and Elders were invited to contribute to cultural teaching at the Bush Uni. This, and the explicit teachings about the benefits of maintaining traditional knowledges through unit content, was intended to encourage the strengthening and interconnectedness between culturally diverse language groups. Congruent with similar studies (Hauser et al., 2009), active efforts to enhance cultural diversity in the program and provide a culturally inclusive space reflects Indigenous preferred ways of being, knowing and doing in the modern world (Gay, 2018).

Local Employment and Endogenous Economic Development

As reflected in Table 1, the Australian census revealed that Ngukurr community has low socio-economic conditions: high employment, low Year 12 completion rates and low university attainment. Aboriginal people in remote Aboriginal communities want to regain control of professional and decision-making roles; however, they often cannot compete with outsiders who have degrees, work experience and strong negotiating power with employers (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010).

Figure 6. *Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation Staff Undertaking Meaningful Employment as Drivers (Kurt Rogers, left) and Cultural Teachers (Married Couple Dean-Austin Bara and Cynthia Turner, Right).*

Images: Andréa Jaggi

A core objective of the Corporation was to address the low education and skill levels of Indigenous people in surrounding communities and create future leaders. Over the duration, the Corporation maintained a large casual workforce to spread the opportunity amongst community members. The Corporation provided workplace training and employed about 50 Aboriginal people (100% Indigenous) each year (many new staff annually). Local staff are employed in teaching, management, administration and operations roles.

Further to university-level courses, Wuyagiba Bush Uni and other local Training Organisations worked hard over the COVID-19 pandemic period to create Certificate-level training opportunities for Wuyagiba staff and other interested community members. Courses delivered by Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute included parts of the Certificate 1 in Business Administration (Batchelor Institute, in 2020) and parts of Certificate 1 in Automotive Vocational Preparation (Charles Darwin University, in 2022). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 Pandemic disrupted delivery of these units; however, remote on-site delivery picked up in 2023 with Cert 1 and 2 in Workplace Skills (Charles Darwin University). Additionally, staff were sponsored to complete the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations Governance training, obtain driver licenses, undertake first aid training, and other workplace professional development opportunities.

Critical Reflection: Challenges and Lessons Learned

Several contextual, operational and delivery challenges presented throughout the program period. Primary challenges included compounding issues related to remoteness and access, cultural responsibilities, Western institutional and bureaucratic timeframes, staffing and organisational capacity, community lateral violence, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These are not dissimilar to those experienced in other Indigenous education and training programs (Bat & Shore, 2013; Fogarty et al., 2015; Van Gelderen, 2017; White, 2005).

Classed as Very Remote Australia, Wuyagiba's location presents substantial operational challenges. For the Big Rivers Region in general, vast distances and access issues limit course delivery, access to third-party training providers and the delivery of essential goods and services (Boyle et al., 2019). The road to Wuyagiba is a sandy track in significant disrepair. Combined with the seasonal limitation of the northern Australian wet season, and without an operational airstrip or community services, habitation of Wuyagiba and program delivery is limited to April to November (dry season). Furthermore, limited outstation infrastructure exacerbates challenges in maintaining a regular operational workforce. In the absence of a school, clinic, adequate housing,

and other community services, it is difficult for families with children and those with medical conditions to reside at Wuyagiba for long periods of time; hence, Wuyagiba Bush Uni tends to support a large casual workforce. Until major infrastructure funding becomes available, this is unlikely to change.

Funding is critical to the ongoing delivery of the Bush Uni, and we are currently seeking funding from other partners to promote sustainability and expansion of the program. Strong foundational funding was provided by the Australian Government Department of Education from 2019-2022 and again from 2023-2028. However, funding for infrastructure and facility development is not covered. Despite funding limitations, considerable focus and support of the Australian Government has centred on developing the Wuyagiba program to remove the challenges identified by surrounding educational facilities, providing strong and stable internet, reliable power, culturally responsive course delivery and pastoral care, and improved technical facilities (individual laptops, printing and free wifi). Regular trips to local serviced communities ensure students and staff can access essential services. This responsivity, flexibility, and wrap-around support is vital to the successful delivery of Indigenous-led higher education programs on-Country.

Acknowledgement of cultural obligation is an integral and defining part of Wuyagiba's culturally responsive program, although this also presented difficulties when aligning with existing Western education timeframes and expectations of partners. Such organisations did not always understand or acknowledge the importance of such cultural obligations (Gibson et al., 2020; Van Gelderen, 2017). Extensive and ongoing 'Sorry Business' (deaths) within home communities produced gaps in the operational workforce and staggered the study progression of students. Adaptations were continually made to allow for cultural obligations while also satisfying partnering education provider requirements. Boyle et al. (2019) suggested a community 'pipeline' approach, allowing for delivery that reflects the needs, timing, local capacity and, most importantly, cultural considerations.

At Wuyagiba regular meetings between local Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff are integral to allow for communication of any arising cultural obligations and how adjustments could be made to support student learning and staff operations. Cultural sensitivity and responsiveness contribute to the decolonisation of typical Western notions of work and study, demonstrating how mainstream rigid educational structures can be adjusted (Gibson et al., 2020) without compromising Indigenous ways of knowing, being, valuing and doing (Wooltorton et al., 2022). This is also in line with culturally responsive teaching theory (Gay, 2018) that not only requires adjustments to be made for cultural obligation but also strives to maintain academic excellence and provide equal opportunities for all students to excel, despite cultural interruptions.

Further, the definition of work for Aboriginal people does not always align with rigid Western notions and, instead, often involves a way of being in the world, naturally allowing for cultural kinship structures and obligations without the constraints of set timelines (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010). Unless an understanding of different cultural notions of work is present, these differences can exacerbate operational challenges. At Wuyagiba, staff often prefer to participate in work activities in a casual manner, allowing for flexibility to attend to cultural obligations. Staff generally prefer tasks that are hands-on, place-based or experiential with cultural meaning, such as cultural teaching and fieldtrips on-Country.

Reluctance of both staff and students to participate in some tasks is rooted in low self-confidence, feelings of shame, and fear of lateral violence that occurs in many remote Aboriginal communities in Australia (Whyman et al., 2021). Lateral violence has its origins in oppression because of colonisation and disempowerment. It is often expressed as physical and psychological violence and intra-racial abuse, such as gossiping, bullying, backstabbing and social isolation, and can result in fear of Aboriginal people speaking up or engaging in leadership roles. In their recent

review of lateral violence in Australian Aboriginal communities, Whyman et al., (2021) found that it is normalised and common. They argue that more research was needed to understand its effects and identify ways to address this complex psycho-social issue to remove this as a barrier for endogenous Aboriginal community development.

The low English literacy, numeracy, and computer skill level of many Wuyagiba staff and students is also a persistent challenge. To overcome this, we drew on local knowledges, and personal reflections of the teaching and literature, to develop a grounded, culturally responsive learning experience that privileged Indigenous knowledges and embedded English, numeracy, and computer literacies within contextually bound andragogy. Many researchers emphasise the benefits of embedded literacy rather than explicit literacy training as a fundamental component of Indigenous tertiary education (Bat et al., 2014; El Zoghbi, 2008). Embracing contextually bound communication, a strong focus was placed on teaching culturally relevant semantics, using existing cultural knowledge platforms to develop understanding of otherwise foreign concepts. Trudgen (2000) supports this culturally responsive process, noting that such andragogy leads to greater cognition and understanding of foreign concepts. Despite this, more needs to be done to develop English literacy, numeracy and computer skills from an early age in remote communities, and more support is required for older individuals looking to develop these skills. The Macquarie University partnership remains essential in supporting staff and students to build higher-level English skills while the Corporation builds local capacity to take on administrative and Western-oriented teaching tasks independently.

The barriers of institutional and administrative processes extended to vocational education partnerships for Wuyagiba staff training. Individuals from local communities rarely held all the necessary identification documents required to complete third-party provider courses. This produced a vicious cycle of administrative challenges, whereby students were overwhelmed by the paperwork and requirements, leading to disinterest in study. Furthermore, providers who had limited exposure to remote Indigenous contexts did not fully appreciate the existing challenges (remoteness, poverty, limited organisational capacity) and failed to account for these when planning delivery. This is a recurring theme in similar remote education programs, where continued engagement and learning of providers was required to sustain and enhance program delivery (Behrendt et al., 2012; Fogarty et al., 2015; Van Gelderen, 2017).

As with other remote programs, delivery of third-party provider courses at Wuyagiba was hampered by travel restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of this were far-reaching in Arnhem Land. Challenges arose with external staff and providers not being able to enter the 'Arnhem Land Exclusion Zone', which was lifted in 2022, and with computer and technology use capacity limitations, students could not study online (Senior et al., 2022). Work with Indigenous communities who were identified as vulnerable during the pandemic, required the development of COVID-19 safety protocols to ensure staff, students and surrounding communities were protected. In 2021, key Macquarie University staff were permitted to return as essential workers and progress the delivery of courses at Wuyagiba.

Critical Reflection: Enabling Factors of Success

Boyle et al., (2019) conducted a detailed examination of learning pathways and employment opportunities in the Big Rivers Region, Northern Territory. They highlighted the Bush Uni as a program that is actively removing barriers to Aboriginal education, training and employment. Like other programs, we found that Indigenous students were more likely to participate in Wuygaiba courses when adequate internet, clothing, food, money, and a culturally responsive environment were provided (Boyle et al., 2019; Vass, 2012). Other financial pressures associated with study were also deliberately lowered or removed, with all costs covered, including tuition, travel to and from home communities, accommodation, laptops and all other educational,

recreational and essential living needs. Some staff and students have also noted that the partnership with Macquarie University and trips to Sydney at the end of the study period motivate participation and success.

The support provided by Elders, Minggirringgi, Jungayi and other key Aboriginal staff members was seen as a critical aspect of the Bush Uni program, as with Learning on Country programs (Fogarty et al., 2015). Provision of a culturally safe space where language differences, cultural interrelationships and obligations are recognised and prioritised was a key feature of the Bush Uni, in contrast to mainstream universities. Past programs and reviews have recognised the importance of place-based on-Country learning (Behrendt et al., 2012; Van Gelderen, 2017; Vass, 2012). Country is central to Indigenous cultural identity and wellbeing, with Aboriginal Elders utilising and connecting to Country for thousands of years to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledges and practices, including law, ceremony, songlines and languages. Many of the positive outcomes described above have arisen from Wuyagiba's culturally safe higher education space on-Country.

On reflection, a unique aspect of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni that also played a role in group cohesion, peer support and cultural safety, is that all students and staff lived, ate, worked, studied, and recreated together. The Bush Uni is currently delivered over four five-week blocks each year. Many students complete both Micro-credentials, and hence live together, with staff, at the remote Wuyagiba outstation for 20 weeks. Classes run from 9am-5pm, 6 days a week (with half day on Saturday) with 1.5 days free for washing, resting, sports and social activities on site. Fishing is a keen pastime that all staff and students enjoy. Staff are carefully selected to ensure that they can happily work and live together, away from families, with a focus on supporting the students and the teaching program. Students are similarly selected to ensure group cohesion.

Apart from the classroom, the kitchen is at the heart of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni. The Bush Uni has been fortunate to have the support of Ngandi Elder Heather Ponto who has a long history of work as a Health Care Worker and Cattle Station Cook (Nutwood Downs). She ensures that kitchen staff, and at times students and other staff, cook to high standards of nutrition, hygiene and variety. The students and staff receive three meals every day with morning and afternoon teas to break up the days of learning into 1.5 hour blocks. The kitchen is a hive of activity and fun, with music often playing and people singing and dancing. The kitchen is open air with two barbeques and an open fire, with hot water always available for cups of tea or coffee. Provision of healthy and tasty food each day is an essential part of the Bush Uni's success and function to keep students' brains and bodies healthy. Minimal 'junk food' is provided, and students learn healthy eating habits, how to cook and keep the kitchen clean—life skills they take home with them.

Conclusion

Programs seeking to enhance the equitable delivery of higher education and employment on-Country with remote Aboriginal communities would be well served by working closely with Elders, Traditional Owners and key community organisations through an endogenous development process that prioritises Indigenous leadership and Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing. Reflecting on the development, outcomes, challenges and enabling factors of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, we highlight that culturally responsive approaches can enable and empower remote Indigenous communities to work towards regaining local control of higher education, self-determination, and community development, aligned to local cultural aspirations.

The incredibly strong commitment of the Wuyagiba Bush Hub Aboriginal Corporation and community members, combined with the bottom-up local decision-making processes and effective two-way relationship with Macquarie University, has resulted in the Wuyagiba Bush Uni program becoming a successful innovative model for two-way, on-Country higher education for

remote living Indigenous people. As Dr Daniels stated: *"We are not doing this for ourselves, we are doing this for the sake of our community, our Country and our culture".*

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Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal Students and their Families from Regional and Remote Areas Project: Yipirinya School Case Study

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Abstract

Over the last few years, attendance rates in remote schools have fallen, and Year 12 completions have also dropped. We are not sure why this is, though events like COVID-19, floods and other natural disasters have not made it easy. The case study presented here was part of a bigger project that sought to understand what people in remote schools and the communities they are in think makes a difference to attendance and Year 12 completion. This case study outlines the findings specific to one of the four case study sites, namely, Yipirinya School on Arrernte Country in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). The overarching finding of the study indicates that attendance alone cannot be the primary measure of school success; rather, engagement needs to be the focus. To tease out this finding, the three main themes: relationships, purpose, and cultural safety, are identified as factors that made a difference at Yipirinya School.

Introduction

For over a decade, school attendance has dominated the remote education sphere. Despite this, attendance rates continue to fall. The motivation for this, in part, derives from the Australian Government's 'Closing the Gap' policies, which include attendance targets for First Nations students. There has been an assumption that increased school attendance will improve school outcomes.

This article investigates what students, school staff and community members say leads to increased school attendance and focuses on engagement. The article is based on research conducted in the Northern Territory and Western Australia during 2023 by a team of researchers from Batchelor Institute, Curtin University, and the University of Notre Dame (Guenther et al., 2023). The research focused on remote and very remote Independent and Catholic schools. Within the project there were four case study sites. Specifically, this article provides a case study from Yipirinya School in Mparntwe (Alice Springs), Northern Territory. The project sought to answer two questions: What has impacted student attendance, engagement, and retention in remote and very remote schools in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, and how (including COVID-19 and other events)? And: What targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies lead to improved student attendance, engagement, and retention in remote and very remote schools of Northern Territory and Western Australia?

The findings highlight the need for a focus on both attendance and engagement. We emphasise that concerns about school attendance is at best, a poor proxy for educational outcomes (Guenther, 2013; Waller et al., 2018). Concerns about school attendance are more often about engagement in learning at school than they are about the proportion of children and young people attending school on any day. We discuss the factors that encourage and negatively impact attendance. We also outline the factors affecting engagement, including historical connection, school environment, leadership, governance, teachers and teaching, student and external factors, systemic and policy issues The findings have implications for schools, school systems, state and federal policies and associated funding priorities. The *Researching school engagement of Aboriginal students and their families from regional and remote areas project* was funded under the Department's Emerging Priorities Program. (see reports link https://www.remoteschoolengagement.au/final-reports).

Yipirinya School

Yipirinya is an independent, non-government Northern Territory school that caters for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from Transition to Year 10 (Yipirinya School, 2023). Students typically identify from one or more language groups: Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte. Located to the west of Mparntwe (Alice Springs), it is classified as a 'remote' school. The school has a distinctive community-driven history. Since 1978, the school has been centred on a two-way approach to education.

According to the 2023 *My School* data, there are 293 student enrolments, comprised of 155 boys (53 percent) and 138 girls (47 percent) (My School, 2023). Attendance rates from 2023 *My School* data are reported as 35 per cent (the highest since 2019).

Over the past two years, staffing in the school has increased dramatically. In 2021, *My School* data states there were nine teaching staff and 16 non-teaching staff (My School, 2023). This increased significantly in 2022 to 20 teaching staff and 55 non-teaching staff. Data from this project reflect another staffing increase in 2023 with over 109 staff (over 70% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent). Within the staff, several local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff

members are qualified primary education teachers. They are Luritja, Eastern Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte leaders who have worked in the school for decades.

Data from this project revealed that Yipirinya School is currently financially operating on an annual budget of $15 million, hence, 302 enrolments equates to $49,000 per student. This is a dramatic overall increase from the most up-to-date My School data (2022), which reports annual funding of $11.2 million with 277 enrolments, equating to $40,678 per student (My School, 2023).

Researcher Positionalities

The team who undertook this research consisted of two First Nations and six non-Indigenous researchers and 26 First Nations community-based researchers (four from the Yipirinya School) who brought their own ways of being, doing and knowing to the task, ensuring the research instruments were culturally appropriate for remote and very remote communities. Batchelor Institute researchers worked with the community researchers to prepare them for the research work (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Two-day Community-Based Researcher Training Program at Yipirinya School in March 2023.*

Methodology

Indigenist perspectives

Yarning, the oral tradition of storytelling (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010; Ober, 2017) is a feature of Indigenous social engagement, and it aligns strongly with Indigenous methodologies. This style of communicating, relating, coming together, and connecting is an important way of sharing through stories. In the research reported here, semi structured interview schedules guided these conversational processes, prioritising Indigenous ways of communicating, culturally prescribed,

cooperative, humorous, and respectful (Walker et al., 2014). Utilising yarning and storying during the data collection helped to ensure the research design was culturally safe enhancing the validity of the data (Fredericks et al., 2011). Other related strategies for data collection included the Kapati Method (Ober, 2017) which draws on a narrative inquiry approach.

At Yipirinya School several staff members took on the role of community-based researchers. They were critical to conducting the research.

Sample

The final data set included 139 interviews undertaken by trained community researchers, conducted with 28 Elders and community members, 50 school staff, 13 principals or school leaders and 48 students at various remote locations in Western Australia and Northern Territory. Online surveys were completed by 226 respondents including 26 students, 63 community members and 137 school staff. At Yipirinya, 19 staff (including school leaders) and nine students took part in yarns with the research team and completed online surveys.

Findings

The overarching finding of the study indicates that attendance alone cannot be the primary measure of school success, rather engagement needs to be the focus. To tease out this finding specific to the Yipirinya School case study, three primary themes are outlined: relationships, purpose, and cultural safety. We also report the impact of COVID-19 and a weather event on attendance and engagement at the school.

Relationships
For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, connection through family is an essential societal value in everyday life. Over the course of the data collection period at this case study site, 'relationship and connections' was a key recurring theme. For many of the Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte students, social relatedness is organised through the Law. Across central Australia, the classificatory section system, known as the kinship system, regulates how people relate with one another across all aspects of everyday behavioural patterns in life, marriage, funerals, land ownership and ceremonial life. When students step into the school setting, the societal value of relationships is not surrendered at the gate. With this in mind, Yipirinya School has rebuilt its workforce with Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte people (from 25 staff in 2021, 75 in 2022 to 109 staff in 2023 with over 70% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent). By having kinship family members in the school setting—both teaching and non-teaching staff—students expressed a sense of connection through their existing familial relationships that intertwine them into broader society. This finding reinforces the need for remote schools to invest in the local workforce. Yet, simply employing a local workforce cannot be the solution. Instead, local staff must be invested in through authentic, non-tokenistic approaches with access to training packages, by overcoming power imbalances with equal pay, professional development, housing, incentives, qualifications, salary, and the bridging of the digital divide. For non-local school leadership and staff, this requires an inward analysis of possible gatekeeping practices. Data from this case study indicated that the gatekeeping reality is not perfect at Yipirinya. However, the school's transparency and willingness to try innovative localised solutions is evident. Additionally, the way the school was conceived may have contributed to the localised power, ownership, and authority over the school. Many of the Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte staff have been involved in the school for decades. One teacher's father was part of the Supreme Court team in the 1980s advocating for the school to be formally registered. When it comes to school engagement, these long term, intergenerational staff connections and relationships are fully supported by students and the wider community.

Purpose

Another emerging theme from the case study data is the link between attendance, engagement, and retention to purpose. In the education sphere, purpose can be described as contextual meaning and connection to real life. At Yipirinya School, the data indicated that staff, students, and community members all expressed the need for learning to have meaningful connections to everyday life. Yipirinya School carries out purposeful learning through a strengths-based approach with on-Country learning and language programs. Currently, the school runs on-Country trips in their language groups. Students in their language groups also participate in a once-a-term, three-to-four-day on-Country camp. As an independent school, Yipirinya has financial agency over budgeting decisions and can spend money to build engagement and purpose into learning. While some concerns were raised with the process (e.g., some staff stated the on-Country trips were more like excursions, organised by non-local staff and some students expressed they'd like more cultural learning on those trips), the data overall indicated that on-Country learning programs and language curriculum were reasons for attendance in school as they gave contextual meaning and purpose to their learning. Data from this project indicated that while change was good, any changes to school structure should go through local governance and leadership structures.

Cultural Safety

All three participant groups (students, staff, and community members) reinforced the connection to cultural safety, with attendance, engagement, and retention. Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Arrernte staff highlighted the need for more cultural awareness training for non-local staff. Intercultural training and cultural inductions encourage students, families, and the wider community to respond, engage, and return to non-local staff who display understanding, empathy, and a willingness to learn about their socio-cultural values, practices, knowledges, and languages. Local staff who have been at the school for decades mentioned that in the past, there had been intercultural training and cultural inductions, which promoted cultural safety. However, in recent years, the events have fallen behind. This finding suggests that remote schools should improve non-local training and awareness for staff. In addition, the data from Yipirinya School leadership team reinforced the responsibility of higher education training providers to educate local preservice teachers. Non-local preservice teachers should be equipped with foundational cultural awareness to knowledges and history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, importance of kinship and family, impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the Stolen Generations, and the ongoing impact of intergenerational trauma. They also need tools for reconciliation, an understanding of the concepts expressed in The Uluru Statement of the Heart. This type of training would offer non-local preservice teachers the tools to enter remote schools with fair, safe, and respectful approaches to students, their families, and local staff.

Impact of COVID-19 and a Weather Event

Two major unexpected events impacted student attendance, engagement, and retention at the school: COVID-19 and a weather event. The weather event was a localised storm that damaged several of Yipirinya's school buildings. A reoccurring pattern across both events was the unexpected positives. While participants commented on the fear and uncertainty of COVID-19, the stronger narrative of the data indicated positive aspects of the pandemic as more time on Country with family. Similarly, participants referred to both the positives and negatives of the weather event. While the school was forced to close and relocate classes across the town, the respondents suggested that they enjoyed being linked to different organisations. The yarns reinforced that it can be easy to extract the negative impacts of unexpected events yet, the

positives may outweigh them as schools are focused to find innovative, community-led, less institutional solutions to teaching and learning.

Summary

The *Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal Students and Their Families from Regional and Remote Areas Project* aimed to understand the impact of unexpected events, including COVID-19, on educational outcomes for students. It sought to identify supports for disengaged students to improve educational outcomes and support for school attendance and completion. This case study of Yipirinya School has delivered findings that translate directly to strategic policy and recommended practice. The key finding of this project highlights the need to place dual importance on attendance and engagement. The definition of attendance needs to be reconceptualised to meet the localised, holistic needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. Alone, the measurement of attendance fails to capture the complexities and nuances required to provide contextually purposeful teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In relation to improved student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools, a range of targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies have been highlighted in this case study. The findings of the project pointed to the importance of relationships, contextually purposeful learning, flexible school structures, cultural safety, the connection of funding to metric systems and the need for remote schools to be wrap-around holistic services. Over the data collection period, numerous remote school leaders who were interviewed for this project referred to the successes of Yipirinya School. These leaders described how they were adapting some of the structures, practices, and strategies to their own schools.

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Investigating Remote School Attendance, Retention and Engagement: A Case Study Involving Students as Co-researchers

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Abstract

Predating the introduction of the Closing the Gap strategy in 2007, First Nation students' attendance, retention and engagement in remote schools has been a concern for educators and successive governments. The following paper describes a case study—one part of a large Australian federally funded 'Emerging Priorities Program' project that sought to examine these issues. Specifically, it explores those factors that contribute to either exacerbating the decline in attendance, engagement or retention or lead to improved outcomes. The case study was undertaken at a Vocational Education and Training boarding school catering for Aboriginal students, mostly from remote areas of Western Australia. Students travel considerable distance to attend the school, often because of their family connections to the school. In this study students from one of the English classes became co-researchers in the project, providing input and collaborating at every stage of the research process. The findings indicate the need to adopt a strength-based approach when teaching remote students. This can be achieved through positive relationships between educators and students, which, in turn, is developed through cultural awareness and the use of community members and Aboriginal educators as role models and human resources for schools.

Keywords: *remote schools, Aboriginal students, attendance, engagement, retention, case study*

Introduction

In response to a decline in student attendance, engagement and retention in many regional and remote schools since COVID-19, the Australian Government announced funding as part of the 'Emerging Priorities Program' (EPP) to explore why this was the case. However, pre-dating the pandemic, there have been ongoing concerns among educators and successive governments about declining attendance rates. This article describes a case study – one part of this large federally funded Australian project that sought to examine those factors that contribute to engagement and retention in remote schools. (See
https://www.remoteschoolengagement.au/final-reports).

School Context

This case study was undertaken at a boarding school - Wongutha Christian Aboriginal Parent-directed (CAPS) Vocational Education and Training School. It caters to Aboriginal students from mostly remote Western Australia areas. It is located in the Goldfields-Esperance region of Western Australia close to the small farming community of Gibson, 715 kilometres south-east of Perth. The school is located within an operational farm consisting of approximately 1,000 acres of land. It is an independent school – part of a group of 14 Aboriginal Western Australia Independent Community Schools and one of three CAPS schools. These schools are governed by one board comprised mainly local Aboriginal community members.

Catering for up to 70 Year 11 and 12 students, at the time of this study about 60 were attending the school. All were First Nations students, speaking a language other than English as their first. The principal noted school attendance is not an issue—"*all students attend unless they are sick. There is nowhere to go. It is in the high 90%*"—however, retention remains "*a challenge*".

Students travel considerable distances to attend Wongutha. They come from the Kimberley, Pilbara and Goldfield and the central desert regions of Western Australia. Many come from small, remote communities. They are usually multilingual, speaking traditional languages (e.g., Goondiyandi, Kija, Nyangumarta) and/or Kriol (a creole spoken in northern Australia) and/or Aboriginal English (a distinct dialect of Australian English) and Standard Australian English (SAE)-the language they are least proficient in.

The school delivers accredited training and arranges assessments, focusing on Certificates I and II in Agriculture, Rural Operations, Hospitality, Business Administration, General Construction, Conservation and Environmental Management (CAEM), Horticulture, Automotive Mechanics, Metals and Engineering. The school aims to develop the students' vocational skills and their proficiency in SAE, including their written and oral competence. Workplace learning provides opportunities for building confidence and relational skills, which directly pertains to the school's motto: 'Training For Life'. Students also study other subjects, including mathematics and literacy, which are levelled according to ability, not age.

Notably, the school ensures that by the end of a student's enrolment, they have the credentials they need to live and work back in their community or elsewhere. Staff help students to obtain identifying documentation, including driver's licences, bank accounts, Medicare cards, My Gov accounts, and birth certificates.

Research on Engagement and Retention

Two research team members, Oliver and McCarthy, have a long-established relationship at the school, especially working with Jackson – a teacher at the school. In a previous project about the life lessons, the students were trained as co-researchers to collect and analyse the data gained by way of interviews with past Wongutha students (see Shay et al., 2023). Building upon this, in the current study the students (n=11) were both participants and co-researchers. They interviewed ten family and community members. In addition, the principal and several teachers were interviewed.

Whilst the overall project addressed more general questions about attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools, and the impact of events including COVID-19, and what to do to improve these aspects, in this case study, students focussed on five main questions they helped develop:

1. Why do students attend school?
2. What supports school retention?
3. Why do students drop out?
4. Why do students disengage?

5. What difference did COVID-19 make?

Findings

The findings from this case study emerged both from the current students' input and also from the data they collected and analysed. The five multifaceted and overlapping themes include: relationships, cultural safety, supportive school environment, purpose, and outside factors. A final finding relates to the impact of COVID-19.

Relationships

When both current and past Wongutha students were interviewed, they reflected that their positive relationships with the teachers and staff supported their engagement, ongoing attendance and retention. One interviewee stated: "*A good thing for Wongutha is all the staff and all the teachers... they made me feel at home here*".

They also described the support and positive characteristics of the principal, various teachers, and other staff, particularly boarding staff and past Elder. When describing Aboriginal staff who previously worked at the school, participants used the titles "*Aunty*" and "*Uncle*" out of respect (as is the cultural custom) and also with affection. The principal indicated that "*strong relationships are our highest value...(we) want that to be real (for the students)*".

The participants attributed their relationships with peers as another factor that ensured their attendance and engagement – "*Fellowship, friendship and mates*" and "*coming out to Wongutha was a second home to me. And in the dorm with the boys, we were all... 'brothers'. Look after each other, help each other.*"

Some participants also indicated that the team sports played in the local community contributed to their retention. Being a member of the local football and basketball team created a sense of friendship and solidarity. This generated a feeling of inclusivity and responsibility to return to school.

Finally, the participants acknowledged that attendance, engagement and retention at all schools are impacted by relationships. One interviewee indicated "*More encouragement, teacher relationships with the students*" was needed. Poor relationships at other schools with staff (in all cases non-Aboriginal, often culturally unaware staff), were noted as reasons for why Aboriginal students don't attend or engage in school.

Cultural Safety

Student participants acknowledged that Wongutha CAPS is a culturally safe environment. They recognised the school, with its long history of working with Aboriginal students, including from their own communities, meant that staff understood and knew about their culture and their ways of 'being and doing'. The principal and teachers indicated that understanding their students' culture governed how they approached, interacted with, and taught the students. The principal also outlined how there is ongoing cultural awareness training for all staff provided by Aboriginal staff. In addition, staff regularly escort students to and from school and engage with the students' communities, gaining a better understanding of where they come from, their language and culture.

The key role that Aboriginal staff play both at Wongutha CAPS and, more generally, was consistently emphasised by participants. Generally, it was reported that Aboriginal staff help foster culturally safe schools and enhance students' well-being by recognising and respecting their cultural identity. They also provide important and positive role models and a vital link between home, community and school. They are a resource that enables culture to be brought into the classroom (or taking the classroom out 'On Country'), fostering students' interest and

motivation. When cultural activities become part of the curriculum, students are engaged and want to attend school.

Supportive School Environment

Schools that provide supportive environments catering to student needs were seen to encourage attendance and engagement. Participants also discussed the converse (i.e., an unsupportive environment leading to poor attendance and engagement). One interviewee indicated that in unsupportive schools, there was a "*lack of communication, no support, and ... no encouragement*".

Participants described the importance of creating supportive and fun classrooms where students can enjoy learning. This may involve creating peer work: "*It's a good place... to learn social skills and to interact*". A positive school environment uses approaches that cater to the student's particular ways of learning and recognises their cultural "*ways of doing things*". It occurs with a strength-based approach to learning—acknowledging what students bring to school, building on what they know and can do, and adjusting the teaching to suit their language background and needs.

Participants indicated that schools that did not create supportive environments were why students stopped attending – they "*drop out*". When teaching is unsupportive and students feel behind - "*feeling like you can't keep up,* " they stop attending. "*Some people find learning hard, some people don't enjoy it, some people struggle with class work ... it's challenging*".

Other participants reflected on bullying, racism, discrimination—even lateral violence—that they have experienced or seen at 'other' schools. The students discussed how this negatively impacts Aboriginal students' school attendance and engagement. Finally, several participants pointed to trauma that some Aboriginal students have experienced and how this works against school attendance and engagement (e.g., "*Because .... they lost their parents*" or "*maybe they're getting abused... a lot of things that could be going wrong*").

Purpose

One aspect also widely discussed related to the purpose of education, namely, getting work after school:

> *You need education to get a good job, get a high-paid job, and once you get all the tickets ... there's nothing stopping you ... With education, it will come easier.*

This was a perception consistently captured in the data: "*education, to get a job*".

Beyond these aspirations, others suggested engagement occurs because students see the inherent "*value of education*" and they "*have a desire to go*". Again, Aboriginal role models were described as important for explicitly demonstrating the purpose of schooling. In contrast, lack of attendance and engagement was attributed to students not "*seeing the relevance of education*" and being "*bored*" at school. Students suggested others do not go because "*they think they know everything already*", and "*once they know how to read and write they think they know enough and don't need to go anymore*".

The students also discussed the need to have schools make "*meaningful connections to everyday life*". An interviewee indicated: "*Make it interesting for them, hobbies and VET classes and what they like doing. Getting their licence, you know*". This was something also reflected by the principal when he said: "*We are purposeful... there is a reason to be here (at Wongutha)*".

Outside Factors

Participants reflected on factors outside schools that affect attendance and engagement. Some attributed low attendance to the lack of parental support for schooling. Several Wongutha students reflected on how strict their parents, grandparents or other members of their extended family are and how they "*make them go to school*". They talked about others not going (to other

schools) because they "*stay up late and then can't get up to come to school*", sometimes because they are "*playing computer games*" or watching "*TikTok, Snapchat*" late at night and it is "*too hard to wake up and get to school*". Finally, others said some families did not have money for school supplies and excursions, and so did not send their children to school. One interviewee described how she could not return to school as there were no funds or support from her family.

The Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 was discussed and the response from participants was consistent - it did not make much difference to attendance and engagement, although it was acknowledged that it may have exacerbated an already existing situation. The principal did acknowledge that COVID-19 impacted the enrolments and after the shutdown, some students did not return because they had to be vaccinated and some communities and families were against vaccination.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that attendance, engagement, and retention are strongly aligned with meaningful, engaging, culturally sensitive learning. While family encouragement, workplace preparation and aspirations for the future were important, the most consistent reason for returning to school was to participate in purposeful and enjoyable learning experiences. Other key factors included having solid long-term relationships between students, their families/communities, and teachers. At Wongutha CAPS strengths-based programs and a strong sense of cultural safety provide further reason for coming to school and staying. At this school Indigenous knowledge, culture, and languages are valued.

Wongutha CAPS provides a model of education that, over time, has worked to address the needs of students. It caters for a particular cohort of students and continues to explore ways to improve what they do by building relationships, being supportive and culturally safe and working in ways that give purpose to their students' education. However, at Wongutha CAPS, as elsewhere, there are perennial issues related to Aboriginal students going to boarding school - homesickness, unfamiliarity, travelling significant geographical distances, leaving family, community and adjusting to the cooler climate.

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Book review: Cornish, L., & Taole, J.M. (2021). Perspectives on Multigrade Teaching: Research and Practice in South Africa and Australia. Springer

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Multigrade Teaching: South African and Australian Perspectives

The significance of book reviews lies in at least two areas. Besides providing a concise summary of the discourses and facts presented in the book, they offer both the authors and readers a valued critique. The book under review purported to explore multigrade teaching in contrasted resource-deprived (South Africa) and resource-rich/abundant (Australia) contexts. Bannister-Tyrrell and Pringle (2021) provide a helpful clarification of the concepts associated with multigrade classrooms which, if not properly dissected, may lead to confusion (see chapter 10). In addition, the authors (Bannister-Tyrrell and Pringle, 2021) -argue that making sense of multigrade classrooms relies on the "*reflective rationale used to form the class*" (p. 185). For example, *multiage* classes are formed by choice because of a belief in the value of learning with younger and older peers (Bannister-Tyrrell and Pringle, 2021, p. 185). On the contrary, *multigrade* classes are formed through necessity (Cornish, 2013), mostly in rural areas where acute shortages of teachers and learners are common. Due to the earlier contextual elucidation, Australia, with its plentiful resources, is more likely to be spoiled for choice and resultantly have more multiage classes than multigrade classes which South Africa is associated with.

Similar disparities between multigrade schools in Australia and South Africa are noted in respect of access to information and communications technology (ICT) as well as internet connectivity (Department of Basic Education, 2013; du Plessis & Subramanien, 2021) which is problematic in the latter. Whilst it may be conceded that exposure to and availing ICT tools may not necessarily lead to increased uptake, strides at making teaching in multigrade South African classrooms is reportedly, made bearable by the South African teacher laptop initiative (Mahlong, 2009). The one-laptop initiative in South Africa, was an attempt to introduce ICTs to multigrade teachers, including the internet and software such as Microsoft Office (du Plessis & Subramanien, 2021, p. 215). Contained in chapter 11 (last chapter of the book), the narrative of introducing ICTs in multigrade classrooms is commendable in that it inspires traversing the fourth industrial revolution spaces concomitant with current development trajectories. However, the use of dated literature might have missed out on current discourses.

This book identifies 'isolation' as a major issue particularly in developing countries, brought about by the United Nations call for universal primary education (United Nations, 2015a, b; Cornish, 2021). Mostly and through deficit lenses, different chapters lament the ubiquitous lack of resources and portray multigrade classrooms as subjects of profound marginalisation and disadvantage. Most importantly, suggested relief is thought of [consistent with deficit thinking] as emanating from elsewhere [mostly from the government]. Therefore, what is called the locus of control is perceived to be from 'out there'. In such situations, local communities miss the opportunity to discover, map and mobilise local assets with a view to finding local solutions. For

example, mention is made of teachers not receiving support (Cornish, 2021, p. 15; du Plessis & Subramanien, 2021, p. 119).

Some strategies for dealing with the 'daunting task' of teaching in multigrade classrooms were suggested. Van Wyk (2021) proposed the use cooperative learning [emphasising teamwork amongst learners], Taole and Cornish (2021) addressed the challenge of isolation through communities of practice and further, Taole (2021) dealt with assessments. It was further encouraging to note theoretical framing which adopted critical and capabilities theories. These two theoretical lenses complement each other. Whilst the former seeks to challenge the status quo and advocates for change, the latter inherent assets/capacities that are often overlooked in finding local solutions (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). My reflection on these suggested strategies is that they are valued owing to the fact that they might have worked elsewhere. We therefore need to look deeper into the phenomenon of locally or home-brewed strategies.

This book does not contain a concluding chapter. Concluding chapters provide scope for a holistic reflection, are known for synthesizing main points of a book and most importantly, illuminating issues that stood out in the discourses and signal those that need further attention. The editors may have partly addressed the concern in chapter 1 (par. 1.4, Conclusion) even though the section creates an impression that it was a conclusion of chapter 1 and not the entire book.

In conclusion, a point has been made that multigrade classrooms remain a persistent feature of the educational endeavour. This book provides a valuable resource for teachers, governments and communities.

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