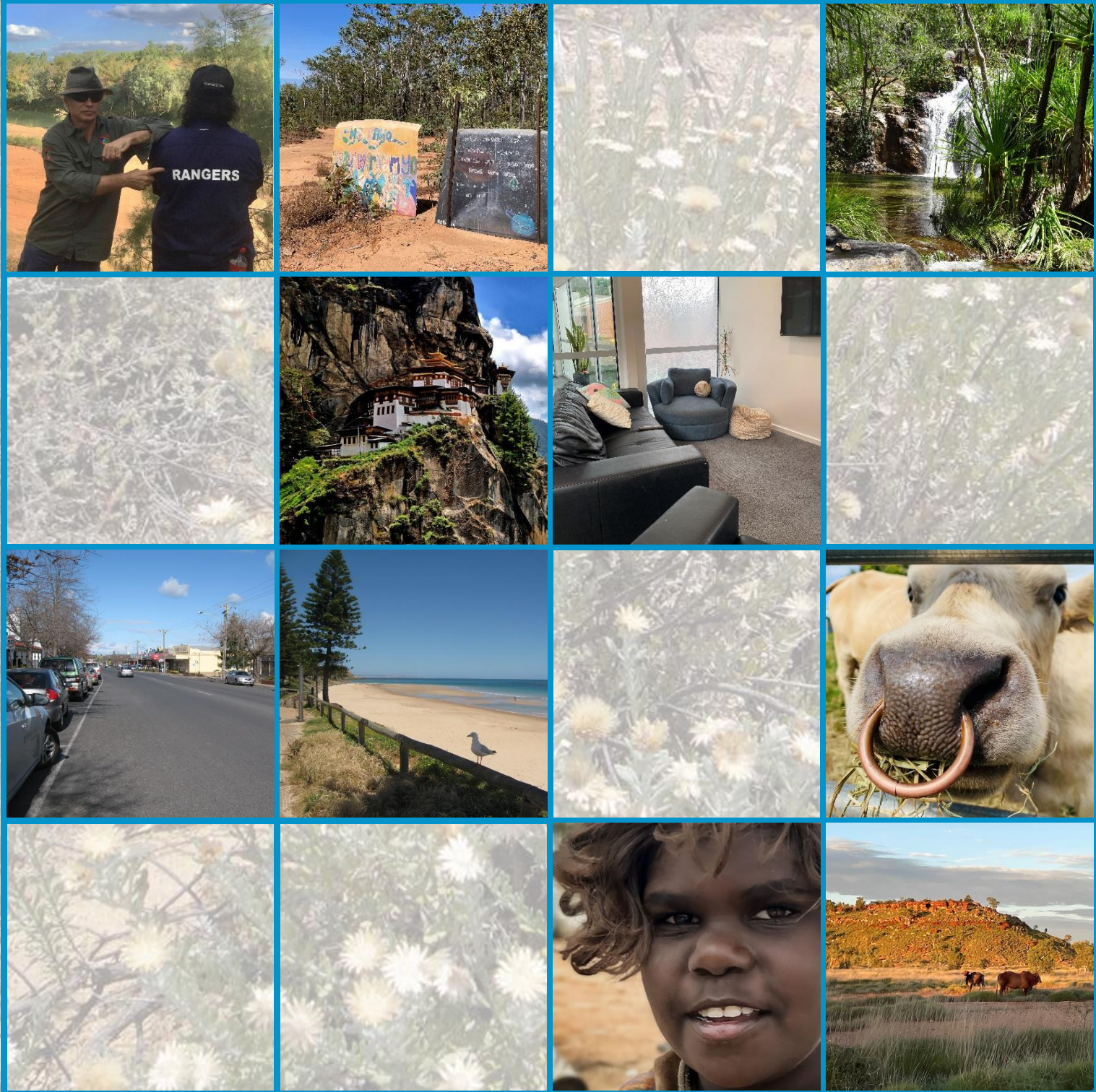


AUSTRALIAN AND INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RURAL EDUCATION



Volume 34 Issue 3
November 2024



SPERA
Society for the Provision of
Education in Rural Australia

AUSTRALIAN AND INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RURAL EDUCATION

Volume 34, Issue 3

November 2024

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ISSN 1839-7387

The *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* is the Journal of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA). It serves as an international medium for educators and researchers with an interest in rural education



S P E R A

Society for the Provision of
Education in Rural Australia



Rural Researcher and Practitioner Responses to Misrecognition and Distributive Injustice

John Guenther

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au

Hernan Cuervo

University of Melbourne

hicuervo@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

The articles in this issue can be viewed through the lens of theories of recognition and distributive justice. These theories, when applied to rural education, point to the marginalisation and devaluing of rural education, such that some kind of remedy is required. The remedies for these are arguably the responsibility of systems that develop policies and provide funding for research and education. But we find that educators and researchers respond in their own way to the deficits and distributive injustices that are imposed on their roles in rural and remote communities. In the articles of this issue, we see researchers and practitioners investing their time, persisting and persevering despite apparent failure, engaging socially, and making space for the next generation of educators and researchers. The contexts in which these actions are taken vary, and so too do the expressions of these responses.

Keywords: *recognition theory, distributive justice, failure, investment of time, intergenerational leadership, sociality*

Introduction

The final issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* for 2024 brings together a set of research and practice articles which address significant issues for all sectors of the education system. The articles discuss theoretical and practical issues related to rural and remote students in primary, secondary schools and vocational settings, and those who are engaged in higher education pre-service preparation programs.

As I (John) was thinking about the editorial for this issue, I had the good fortune of hearing a lecture from my colleague Hernan Cuervo, who discussed a book chapter he has written for a volume edited by Simone White, Jayne Downey and Melyssa Fuqua on rural leadership (Cuervo, in press), and which should be available very soon! Hernan's lecture focused on the challenges of leading research and teaching through the lens of recognition theory. As I reflected on this lecture and the articles in this issue, I thought it might be helpful to see if the theory and the practical responses Hernan was suggesting were also reflected in this set of diverse articles. It turns out they are. I'll let Hernan now briefly provide an overview of his chapter.

Theories of Recognition and Redistribution in Rural Education Research and Practice

Rural education research has come a long way from Arnold and colleagues' (2005) cry about a scarcity of scholarship in the field. The last two decades has seen important research produced in

this space. In a similar way, rural teaching has gained a stronger profile in the Australian education policy scene. The latter has occurred probably in part due to the national and international school staffing shortages (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). This visibility of rural teaching is still, however, often depicted in deficit ways – rural schools are seen as challenging for staff and students’ outcomes as lagging behind their urban counterparts. In other words, the urban continues to be the norm (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Guenther et al., 2023). Other colleagues have pointed out that, within teacher education spaces in higher education, rural knowledge and content still do not feature prominently; thus generating the view of rural teaching and schooling as a discrete part of the whole practice and profession of teaching (Roberts et al., 2022).

The former, the research side, while becoming a stronger field, still exudes for some of its very leading scholars a sense of marginalisation vis-à-vis the broad education research field. Doing a survey of the field, we found that both national and international scholars revealed a disrespect or withheld recognition from the broader field. For example, Howley et al. (2014) recalled how, despite their vast experience within academic publishing, they found it hard to get published a journal article in mainstream education research that had rural and social class as the main foci of their argument. They questioned the “*cognitive dissonance*” (p. viii) of reviewers and the field at large. Leading rural education scholars, such as Corbett and White (2014) and Roberts and Fuqua (2021), are concerned with the misrecognition of the broader education research landscape and call for the development of methodologies and research that make rural matter. Corbett and White argued that rurality sits outside modernity and hence is easy to neglect. They came to produce an insightful book on rural education methodologies that can help seasoned and novice researchers in the space to find their tools for inquiry. Meanwhile, Roberts and Fuqua argued for the reversal of a metrocentric agenda that easily dismisses rural epistemologies and methodologies. While these issues and arguments are fully developed in the chapter (Cuervo, in press), here it is pertinent to engage with theory of recognition as a way to theorise this misrecognition in research and practice.

In thinking about rural education’s misrecognition in education research and practice, I (Hernan) have pondered elsewhere if this is a matter of distribution or recognition (see Cuervo, 2020). This question relates to Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth’s (2003) rich debate on justice. Without wanting to rehearse this well-known debate, it could be stated that Fraser proposes that remedies to injustices sometimes demand distribution of material resources and/or a recognition of the moral and cultural status of a social group, individual or issue at stake (see also Fraser, 1997). For Honneth, remedies to injustices and inequalities ultimately always emanate from an institutional expression of misrecognition, disrespect and denigration for a social group or individual (see also Honneth, 1995). For him, the main moral category at play in a situation of injustice is recognition. In a sense, both theorists affirm that economic (distributive) justice and cultural (recognitional) justice matter. Fraser will attend to each particular case to understand if the remedy demands both or one type of justice. Differently, Honneth, who does not shy away from the need of a politics of distribution of financial and material resources, views the root of any injustice as the cultural misrecognition or disrespect that other members of society or institutions can give to a certain social group. In other words, the lack of access to a certain resource is formed from the basis of a misrecognition or disrespect for that group or individual’s needs, rights and interests.

When considering White et al.’s (in press) challenge of how we lead in rural education, I firstly thought about the question: what are the injustices we face about? As mentioned above, my experience in teacher education resonates with Roberts and colleagues’ (2022) argument that rural education does not feature prominently in this space. As a result, I have found, for example, that pre-service teachers can build their understanding of rural work and life from anecdotes and stereotypes that often depict rurality on a binary: as the idyll or the deficit place. At play here, I

thought, is a cultural misrecognition by institutions to rural teaching and rural ways of being. As Roberts and colleagues posit, there is a withheld recognition in the national space of teacher education to the possibilities, needs and interests of rural schools and people. In terms of rural education research, it appeared to me that the overemphasis on the importance of rural matters by distinguished scholars in the field pointed to an epistemological harm based on disrespect and denigration, and social invisibility (see Honneth, 1995, 2001) from the cultural research institutions and individuals producing valuable knowledge in our discipline. The question was, as posited by White and colleagues, how do we answer and remedy these shortcomings and injustices?

Thus, secondly, I considered that, to redress this misrecognition of rural education, certain factors and practices needed to be carried out. Without reiterating what I stated elsewhere (Cuervo, in press), some practices need to be in place to make rural visible. In the first instance, to lead and/or contribute to recognise rural education research and practice time is critical. This means being prepared to dedicate your own labour and personal time to the idea and practice of making rural visible in a crowded space as that of education research. There is a commitment that demands, above many things, your time. And time, as we know, has become a valuable and often scarce resource. In addition, leading in any field entails failure. Samuel Beckett's (1983) now famous quote "*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*" (p. 7) encapsulates the experience of many academics, including Howley and colleagues (2014). Our American colleagues experienced in the art of academic publishing encountered what Miranda Fricker (2007) would call an epistemic injustice, and most precisely hermeneutical injustice; that is, a structural prejudice in the attention economy of the crowded education research landscape. The cognitive gap from our broader education research colleagues to understand the relevance of Howley and colleagues' (2014) argument about the importance of class and rurality derived in failure for them. Nevertheless, this failure led to a vibrant edited volume on the intersection of rurality and social class that has become a research landmark in our field (see Howley et al., 2014).

Thirdly, I argue that leading to redress rural education's misrecognition involves, from oneself, sociality. This means getting involved and building dialogues and bridges with others to create a vibrant place of research and practice that generates the resignification of the cultural and moral status of rurality. Finally, to sustain a strong rural education research and practice place entails making space for others, in particular for upcoming colleagues. So fourthly, leadership involves an intergenerational approach to our concerns, activities and ways of being. If we really care about a space, thinking beyond ourselves is critical.

Responding to Misrecognition and Distributive Injustice

The articles in this issue, while not specifically focused on Cuervo's theoretical and practical positions, each draw out practices which align with his propositions related to investment of time, failure, sociality, and intergenerational processes of making space.

The article by Susan Webb, Reshmi Lahiri-Roy, Lizzie Knight and Paul Koshy explores geography, topography and mindset for rural tertiary education participation in Australia. The authors frame rural tertiary education as a "*policy problem*" (p. 2), noting the barriers and disadvantages experienced by students. They report on the "*senses of failure*" experienced by students who felt the pressure of "*not being able to leave*" (p. 8). However, they also found an accompanying "*resilience of the dispositions*" (p. 7) among those who cross the imagined borders of opportunity. They argue that undervaluing rurality results in perpetuated social injustice, arising from "*symbolic and cultural barriers to participation*" (p. 12). Here we see a direct connection to misrecognition and cultural injustice driven by and perpetuated by policies and structures that reinforce and perpetuate discourses of rural deficit and failure. Following Honneth (1995, 2001), what Webb and colleagues point out is the disrespect to the cultural and moral status of rurality.

Catherine Thiele, Joanne Casey, Linda Eager, Susan Simon and Shelly Dole present research on a pre-service teacher preparation program conducted in Queensland. They highlight the importance of sociality in their descriptions of “*connecting and connectedness*” (p. 28) and attribute these characteristics in school leaders to the success of the program they investigated. While this does not surprise us, we wonder why the leaders’ “*intentionality*” (p. 26) of building trusted and reciprocal partnerships is so significant for rural education programs. Perhaps it is the case that people from urban centres, for example, participating in rural pre-service preparation programs, have few connections with people in rural contexts, and perhaps the converse applies for rural students going to an urban university. Perhaps the intentionality described by Thiele and colleagues is a requirement as a way of overcoming the cultural injustice created by the perceived geographic barriers between the rural and the urban. In Thiele and colleagues’ article, the tensions between Fraser and Honneth’s remedies for injustice are quite palpable. What is certain from the article is that resource allocations or “*redistributive remedies*” (Fraser, 2008, p.16) are required to create the partnerships and relationships that would otherwise not exist.

Next, Tshering Tshering, Joshua Matthews, and Rachael Adlington discuss teacher attitudes to Information and Communication Technology in Bhutan. This mixed methods study used survey instruments to assess relationships between attitudinal variables related to technology utilisation. In this context (a developing mostly rural country), it is perhaps hard to see how there could be a misrecognition of rurality. However, from a distributive justice perspective, technology utilisation is affected by available infrastructure. The authors note:

In the Bhutanese colleges of education, the first-order barriers of poor internet connection and lack of necessary software persist. Further, the findings highlighted the connection between first- and second-order barriers, in which poor infrastructure (first-order barrier) results in poor attitude (second-order barrier). (p. 48)

In terms of response, teachers expressed feelings of incompetence: “*interview data analysis revealed ‘ICT incompetence’ as a main cause of negative attitudes toward ICT acceptance and use in teaching*” (p. 48). In this, we can see a sense of failure as described by Cuervo. While the study does not directly address misrecognition of rurality, there are clues in the analysis, suggesting that deficit discourses are directly associated with the lack of infrastructure and the poor use of technologies. This then is why a redistributive justice is perhaps required, not just at a national level, but from a global perspective (Heins, 2008).

Simone Healey and Glenn Auld’s article presents a framework for culturally responsive boarding. The authors highlight the sociality of boarding in terms of relationships between students and boarding staff, parents and their children in boarding facilities and communities. They also point to failure where “*the evidence suggests that First Nations student experiences were negative and the antithesis of Culturally Responsive Boarding, ultimately demonstrating what doesn’t work, rather than what works*” (p. 68). Looking through the lens of recognition theory, there is some irony in the phrase “*culturally responsive boarding.*” The need for boarding for remote First Nations students, or residential facilities more generally, comes about largely because so-called remote culture and place are devalued. That is to say, the prevailing policy perspectives are premised on the assumption that it is not worth investing in local education solutions. The devaluing of local education solutions corresponds with a ready acceptance of distributive injustices.

John Guenther, Rhonda Oliver, Robyn Ober and Catherine Holmes explore the issue of why many remote First Nations young people drop out of school before completing secondary schooling. Coming back to Cuervo’s responses, in this article we see failure and resilience sitting side by side. The failures, though, are not necessarily the result of practitioners or researchers. Rather, they are the product of limited access to secondary education in remote communities and the systemic misrecognition—or undervaluing—of people who live in remote communities. While

the political discourses around education are about making education equally accessible and available to all, regardless of location, the reality is different. The authors comment that “less than half of all very remote communities [have] reasonable local access to Year 12” (p. 84). Surely this is inconsistent with the claims of the Mparntwe Declaration (Education Council, 2019) which states that education systems should support “every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face” (p. 2). This calls for the moral and cultural resignification of all social groups, places and ways of life and is surely another reason for proposing redistributive remedies.

Our collection of four Rural Connections papers begins with an article from Lisa Moore, Rachael Macfarlane, Nigel Wakefield and Serena Davie. The authors document the work of Western Australia’s School of Isolated and Distance Education. This is an example of a systemic response to the access problems noted by Guenther and colleagues. Not surprisingly, consistent with Cuervo’s call for sociality in rural education, relationships stand out in this article as a way of breaking the barriers—relationships between staff and students, and relationships with communities. The work of the Regional Teaching Teams is clearly an attempt to give recognition to the values, cultures and contexts of the students they are working with. The authors describe several initiatives that work to provide that recognition, including learning and working on Country programs. Cuervo’s call to invest in time is also noted by the authors, along with a recognition of the need to remedy the systemic cultural injustices that exist:

The team recognises that it will take time to build relationships and trust with local communities ... to deliver appropriate educational outcomes. Whilst there is support in principle from Government agencies, a disconnect still exists between policy and practice in the context of Aboriginal education in schools. (p. 97)

Kathryn Thorburn and Catherine Ridley report on research conducted in another part of remote Western Australia. As with Thiele and colleagues, the themes of connections and connectedness come to life in the case study of Yiyili Aboriginal Community School. The authors describe connections and partnerships with external support services, parents and community members, and local staff. These relationships are a strong reflection of Cuervo’s call for sociality in rural education. Importantly, the authors also talk about the need to make space for the school’s future sustainability: “Supporting ... local staff to feel valued via training and via proper salaried positions would be an investment in the foundations of that connection going forward” (p. 105). Here too we see evidence of recognition at play, such that the community respects the school and the school respects the community: “Interviewees told us that feeling safe was not only about an absence of bullying, but that it also related to a learning environment where culture, language and values are respected” (p. 104).

Robyn Ober’s case study of Nawarddeken Academy in west Arnhem Land provides another illustration of successful engagement in First Nations people in education, despite the challenges noted by Guenther and colleagues above. This case study is a good example of the benefits of investing in time. Ober begins by outlining the story of the school which began with the vision of a Bininj Elder, Professor Bardayal Lofty Nadjamerrek OAM in 2002. It took 13 years for the first campus of the school to open, and another six years of dogged determination (including failures!) to achieve registration for all three sites the school now operates in. The school was established in part because community members and Elders were not satisfied with what the Department of Education was offering (two days per week in two of the homelands). That is, the Elders saw this in terms of a misrecognition of the value of their people and their Country, and so they set about remedying the cultural injustices themselves, garnering support from philanthropic organisations and the main employer in the region, Warddeken Land Management Limited. The school and the three homeland sites have successfully turned the injustices around and are very proud of the recognition they can give to language and culture through on Country learning. They are also making space for the next generation of teachers and community leaders.

Our final article in this issue, from Jaemie Page, takes us to other parts of the Northern Territory and, instead of schools, deals with the important issue of adult learning. Page's work here focuses on "building language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills" to enable "rangers to understand more about what they are doing and why they are doing it" (p. 116). He talks about the importance of time and sociality: "Projects such as this require long-term commitment to build trust and relationships" (p. 117). While his work is important, it possibly would not be necessary but for the misrecognition and the systemic undervaluing of First Nations people living in many remote communities. The distributive justice remedy for this is at least to some extent reflected in the work that Page does (and others like him) to allocate resources to where they are needed. Of course, the cultural and economic injustices that have come from decades of misrecognition and marginalisation in these contexts cannot simply be remedied with foundation skills training, but this is an important first step.

Concluding Remarks

Beyond the theoretical and pragmatic responses to rural misrecognition and redistributive remedies, the articles in this issue draw attention to educational justice issues. In 2024, why is it that within a developed country like Australia we are still talking about access to secondary education (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023), let alone access to full-time primary education in remote communities? And why do we still rely on boarding as a solution to the systemic failure to deliver education in rural and remote locations, when the evidence of potential harm is so strong (Guenther & Osborne, 2021; O'Bryan, 2021)? Why are we even talking about proper salaried positions in remote schools when we know how important a local school workforce is (Guenther & Disbray, 2015)? And why do we have to justify the need for good professional learning and experience programs, as a way of ameliorating so called rural disadvantage (Patfield et al., 2024)? Why are we still talking about basic adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills in remote communities, when such issues should have been addressed in primary school (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment & Training, 2022)? These questions deserve an answer.

The articles in this issue provide some answers to these questions and, as Hernan and I have discussed, the reasons for the research problems which have been investigated here stem in part from misrecognition of rurality and distributive injustices. Maybe the agenda for rural education research going forward should include questions and answers about policy and funding injustices, about reorienting the metropolitan public's thinking about the deficits of the rural, and about addressing some of the supposedly intractable problems that clearly do have solutions.

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The Intersection of Geography, Topography and Mindset: A Nuanced Understanding of Regional, Rural and Remote Students' Tertiary Education Participation in Australia

Susan Christine Webb

*School of Education, Monash University,
Clayton, Australia*
susan.webb@monash.edu

Reshmi Lahiri-Roy

*Institute of Education, Arts and Community
Federation University, Ballarat, Australia*
r.roy@federation.edu.au

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Knight

*Mitchell Institute, Victoria University,
Melbourne, Australia*
lizzie.knight@vu.edu.au

Paul Koshy

*Australian Centre for Student Equity and
Success, Curtin University, Perth, Australia*
p.koshy@curtin.edu.au

Abstract

This paper explores the notion of rurality in Australian tertiary education as part of an investigation into the subtle but distinct differences in participation thinking and patterns among young people in regional, rural and remote communities. Drawing on qualitative data gathered as part of a wider research project for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, the paper examines whether student participation in tertiary education is shaped by factors more deeply related to a sense of connection to community, the relationality and reflexivity as related to the context, as well as proximity to major tertiary education infrastructure, such as campuses. This analysis of place challenges traditional geographical lenses that emphasise regional, rural and remote—or 'RRR'—location in and of itself. Hence, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of language in relation to RRR location as used in Australian policy, providing insights into the contested nature of the Australian term RRR, the concept of rurality in the wider literature, and concomitantly, investigating the impact of the same on youth participation in Australian tertiary education.

Keywords: *rurality, higher education, access, communities*

Introduction

There is a consensus in the literature on rurality and educational aspiration that people in Australian regional, rural, and remote (RRR) communities with low population density and limited proximity to major university campuses, experience more severe forms of geographic isolation than RRR populations in almost any other industrialised country (Alloway et al. 2004; Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2010; Burnheim & Harvey, 2016). The existence of this unique disadvantage means that differences in the settings and circumstances in which education decisions are made can be pronounced between urban and RRR settings in Australia (Eversole, 2016).

While there is a partial recognition that *rurality* in Australia covers considerable geographical territory, it is often depicted with reference to the technical language of geography, where “RRR is used as an umbrella term to characterise non-metropolitan areas across Australia” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, p. 10). However, Brown and Deem (2014) show current

jurisdictional delineations of regions lack nuance, and empirical studies present an informal sub-national view of 'region-regionalism' that is often overlooked by policy actors in Australia. This problem, acknowledged by Alston and Kent (2009), is expanded upon by Robinson (2012, p. 81):

Within the Australian context, the trio of terms 'regional', 'rural' and 'remote' are used to characterize portions of the continental interior beyond the densely populated, coastal urban- and peri-urban fringes. Careless use of these terms potentially ignores enormous diversity in population size, resources, social relationships, economic status, and access to services between different localities.

Another perspective in the research context, is the observed gradient in disadvantage associated with distance from major population centres, nestled alongside intersecting and compounding disadvantage across geography (Corbett, 2015; Gore, et al., 2022). However, Australian education policy in RRR areas continues to grapple with the nature of regional disadvantage and its structure in relation to distance and infrastructure (Halsey, 2018; O'Kane et al., 2023). Research has found that spatial inequality is proving difficult to remedy in RRR areas, with its undesirable effects persisting, often with complex and significant differences in the effect on youth outcomes across areas (Andrews, et al., 2004). Simultaneously, qualitative researchers often neglect the causes driving policy implementation in both urban and RRR areas with little differentiation for region-regionalism (Brown & Deem, 2014). More critically, studies have found that policy implementation across various government levels accompanies a lack of knowledge of the areas it is intended to impact upon (Pape et al., 2016).

This paper investigates the nuances of tertiary education participation in RRR areas of Australia. Specifically, it explores variabilities in how young people in RRR communities are impacted by distance, contributing to the wider literature on contested understandings of rurality in research where distinctions between the rural and urban, and within the rural, are often overstated or underplayed (Lichter & Brown, 2011; Strijker, et al., 202; Woods, 2011). Recent Australian and international research acknowledges this need, stressing the importance of relationality (Cook & Cuervo, 2020) and geographical differences in material and symbolic factors (Hofstede et al., 2022) influencing young people's decision to be leavers or stayers in rural areas.

The paper investigates this in three sections. The first describes low participation in tertiary education in Australian RRR areas and outlines reviews and recommendations from policymakers as how to resolve it. The second discusses educational research that examines differences in the perceptions and thinking of people in urban and RRR areas in relation to tertiary education participation. The third presents and discusses findings from a qualitative study on this issue undertaken as part of a wider research program for a National Centre for Vocational Education Research project. Despite the differences in geographical distance from urban centres and tertiary education provision across RRR areas, the findings highlight similarities in the perceptions about whether to participate in tertiary education by those facing socio-economic disadvantage in these different areas.

Regional and Remote Higher Education in Australia: The Policy Problem

Students who live in Australia's RRR areas and aspire to attend a tertiary institution experience acute educational disadvantage on several fronts. Accessing a university place or even a specialist vocational training provider, often involves moving away from their local community for most RRR students (Alston & Kent, 2009; Mills & Gale, 2007; Walsh & De Campo, 2010). This entails considerable cost and higher levels of engagement with the tertiary sector even before students enter an institution. The cost of travel and accommodation creates additional barriers for these young people who have been found to have significant existing markers of disadvantage (Cardak et al., 2017; Halsey, 2018). Additionally, the relatively nascent culture of moving to attend university tends to reinforce the disadvantage inherent to geographical remoteness in higher

education (Edwards & van der Brugge, 2013), something which is not starkly apparent in other contexts—see for instance, Lasselle’s (2017) comparative work on the higher education expectations of young people in RRR areas in Scotland and Australia.

Compounding these issues is the strong intersection between regionality and socioeconomic status. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Census indicated that 38.2% of the population living in areas classified as “*Inner Regional*” resided in the lowest socioeconomic status quartile of the national population. Such disadvantage intensifies with distance from metropolitan areas, with over 52.9% of the population in “*Very Remote*” Australia being classified as low socioeconomic status (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

These influences combine to amplify the effect of cultural barriers to participation associated with distance in post-school education and training (Bryce & Anderson, 2008; Mills & Gale, 2007). Hillman (2005) finds that when young people from RRR areas do move away from home to access tertiary education, they often face difficulty in maintaining family connections and responsibilities from a distance, placing additional and significant pressures on them.

In response to this challenge, there has been a growing recognition among policymakers that a specific focus on RRR education is required in Australia. The 2018 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (the “*Halsey Review*”) identified the problem of low tertiary education participation for those from RRR areas and made substantive recommendations to government (Halsey, 2018). At the heart of these recommendations was the creation of the position of Commissioner of Regional, Rural and Remote Education (subsequently adopted) to address regional education disadvantage and balance the tension between establishing capacity in the regions and creating a strong sense of regional identity for higher education (Shinners, 2022), with a commitment to enabling students to enter tertiary education institutions in major population centres.

Recognition of this need to balance initiatives to encourage student movement out of the regions with increased higher education investment in RRR areas has informed recent policy, including additional educational infrastructure through formation of Regional University Study Hubs, regional education support centres for university students (Regional University Centres Network, 2023). The hubs allow students at different universities to access office and technology infrastructure to support their studies. Further, greater attention on student income support, has led to the introduction of the Tertiary Access Payment, an initial relocation payment of up to \$5,000 to all commencing ‘on-campus’ RRR students (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020).

Finally, the establishment of the Australian Universities Accord Panel and its current (O’Kane et al., 2023) Review of Australian Higher Education has seen further examination of the potential to address regional educational disadvantage ‘in situ’, with a notable focus on a proposal to expand the number of the Regional University Study Hubs in its Interim Report (O’Kane et al., 2023). In its final report, the Review proposed expanding the program into a *Regional Study Hubs* program which all tertiary students in a hosting RRR area—not just university students—could access services, with an emphasis on the study hubs as customised solutions to meet local requirements (O’Kane et al., 2024).

Arguably, initiatives such as the study hubs represent an emerging development in Australian higher education policymaking in which ‘one size fits all’ rural policies designed to encompass the diversity of regional and remote communities’ are being refined to reflect the diversity of needs across RRR areas.

Effects of Rurality

Gibson et al. (2021) identify the dissonance between policy framing and the contextual realities of diverse rural locations which diminish the appeal of higher education for local students. Yet

tertiary education equity policy has underplayed the important differences between the urban and regional and within the regional (Productivity Commission, 2022). Drawing on international studies, Corbett (2015) highlights the construct of rurality as both material and symbolic while strongly stressing the impact of socioeconomic status on higher education participation among regional youth. He asserts that education in both regional Australia and the United States still tends to be viewed through a lens of “*traditional rural imaginaries*” (p.9) which he designates as problematic and supporting a “*deficit*” view of rurality *vis-a-vis* the more ‘modern’ urban context. Therefore, he calls for a more nuanced lens on rurality and its constituent features in relation to its impact on higher education. On the other hand, Cook and Cuervo (2020) remind us that the shifts within the Australian economy with its shrinking opportunities in employment and limited access to tertiary education for regional youth have driven the “*mobility imperative*” (Farrugia, 2016, as cited in Cook & Cuervo, 2020), often leaving the latter with no choice, stemming from the constant ‘othering’ of the rural.

International research has identified that differences in post-compulsory education pathways have repercussions for people’s labour market outcomes (Dickerson et al., 2022; OECD, 2021), to the extent that these different pathways in post-school participation, that is, university versus vocational education, both reflect and reinforce social class differences and social immobility across geographical contexts (Bjarnason & Edvardsson, 2017; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Hillman & Weichman, 2016). In Australia, it has been shown to be more complex with educational qualification and occupational groups playing a part in differences in participation rates between regional and metropolitan labour markets (Mallik et al., 2014). Furthermore, even though vocational education may act as a safety net against unemployment for lower-status social groups (Iannelli, 2013; Reay et al., 2011; Thompson & Simmons, 2013), it is not universally available outside metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, Corbett (2015) outlines that in Australia there is a “*fairly linear relationship between community size and educational performance, while in Canada and several other countries, mid-sized communities often perform well relative to large cities in some subject areas.*” (p.10).

Mills and Gale (2007) highlight how geographical isolation leads to high levels of chronic unemployment and resultant poverty in a remote ex-mining town in Australia, restricting young people’s opportunities in education and employment. This leaves young people with little understanding of, or access to, alternatives beyond what is presented in their community. Following Corbett’s (2000) work in Nova Scotia, Mills and Gale (2007) observe that young people from middle class and professional backgrounds displaying academic potential are typically encouraged to leave the rural district. They describe an “*inheritance*”, whereby a parental and community history of low educational attainment, followed by long-term unemployment and economic marginalisation, creates cultural assumptions that discourages young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds from leaving the area. This sentiment echoes Cook and Cuervo’s (2020) analysis of the mobility imperative for regional youth and Bloomfield et al.’s (2019) concept of “*hesitant hope*” in the context of young people’s access to alternative learning in RRR areas in Australia.

This notion of inheritance is also present in the work of Heath et al. (2008) in the United Kingdom. Without the possibility of ‘disruption’, as described by Granovetter (1983), young people’s choices tend to reproduce the status quo, and in isolated regional communities, where poverty prevents physical exit (Mills & Gale, 2007), the possibility of disruptive encounters with cultural ‘others’ (Broadbent & Cacciattolo, 2013) is extremely limited. While Mills and Gale (2007) describe an extreme situation in the Australian context, the factors identified above exist more frequently in rural than in urban areas and contribute to the lower levels of interest in university study among young people in rural areas (Cardak et al., 2017; Mitchell Institute, 2015).

Such studies are a reminder that the affective aspects of im/mobility, and the imagined lives/futures/possibilities that contribute to it, may be as powerful in shaping young people’s

post-school choices as the experience of im/mobility itself. The issue may be less whether young people are, more or less, geographically mobile, but whether their geographic im/mobility affects “*their capacity to imagine certain possibilities as being desirable*” (Sellar & Gale, 2011, p.121). However, as Cuervo and Wyn (2012) argue, “*educational institutions are built on the idea of standard temporal and spatial patterns*” (p. 73), including standardised and normative ideas of the nature of the places in which education should take place and to which it should enable young people to move or progress.

Arguably, this standardising framing has driven quantitative collections and research in Australia. This focus has been aided by the large volume of data generated relating to the post-school trajectories of young people derived from government-funded and initiated surveys and reports such as the OnTrack Survey of Victorian Year 12 leavers and the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2024). As a result, analyses using these data sources can be more descriptive than analytical. Large-scale surveys often lack the depth and texture of qualitative data on young people’s decisions to remain in regional areas despite the valorisation of metropolitan imperatives (Farrugia, 2016, as cited in Cook & Cuervo, 2020). This also serves to limit attention to more material or ‘objective’ factors, such as housing and work, as opposed to symbolic or ‘subjective’ factors such attachment to place (Hoefstede et al., 2022). Using a qualitative study drawing on data from studies of young adults from rural areas in three European nations, Hoefstede and colleagues signpost the “*the role of symbolic factors in staying (e.g., Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015), such as ‘symbolic place’*” (Hoefstede et al., 2022, p.148).

This article seeks to explore these symbolic and material factors to address such gaps in the literature in Australia.

Evidence from a Qualitative Study

The analysis draws on qualitative data collected from a three-year research program, *Geographical Dimensions of Social Inclusion and Vocational Education and Training in Australia*, undertaken for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, which examined the intersection of geography, social inclusion, and vocational education in Australia. This work was given ethics clearance by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project CF13/1615 – 2013000841, *Geographical Dimensions of Post-School Participation in Education and Work*). The researchers are from non-Indigenous backgrounds and have undertaken sociological and educational research in the United Kingdom, India, and Australia – the countries from where they originate – as well as in Europe.

Methods

The research in the original funded program was designed to explore the variations in post-school participation in different RRR neighbourhoods to open discussion about the social and spatial boundaries described by these terms.

A qualitative approach was used to complement and extend an earlier quantitative study analysis of participation data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth cohort. The quantitative analysis of participation at postcode level had established that some neighbourhoods with below-average socioeconomic status have above-average student outcomes, and vice versa (Johnston et al., 2014). They argued that further research using qualitative methods was needed to identify how neighbourhood effects work, particularly the mitigating effects of schools and communities.

The qualitative case site research was designed to explore the social-spatial dimensions of tertiary education participation thinking (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The research literature, cited earlier, argued that post-school education im/mobility is related to people’s cultural inheritances and

their social networks. Such literature had been informed by a Bourdeusian conceptual frame (Mills & Gale, 2007; Reay et al., 2011; Heath et al., 2008). Consequently, the qualitative research methodology adopted for the data collection, site selection, and analysis presented here sought to focus on the perceptions and dispositions, or what Bourdeusian scholars conceptualise as the ‘habitus’ of young people with low socioeconomic status and in understanding the perceptions and influences of the social networks and educational stakeholders with whom young people engaged in developing their views of tertiary education participation.

For this paper, two sites in different Australian states were chosen to explore the research question: *How is the tertiary education participation of young people in RRR communities in Australia impacted by social-spatial distances?* The sites were a regional-remote area in Victoria, labelled ‘Eastshire’, and a rural area abutting an urban fringe in South Australia, labelled ‘Southland’. They were selected from the quantitative analyse undertaken by the Johnston et al. (2014) because both case sites had positive scores on young people’s educational *Performance Index*, despite being areas of low socioeconomics compared to two other sites explored in the original quantitative study with similarly low socioeconomic profiles but negative Performance Index scores (see Johnston et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2015). Furthermore, qualitative analysis of data from all four sites originally studied in 2015, showed that the two sites selected for this present analysis exhibited aligned themes in relation to educational participation even though the two sites are very geographically distinct (Webb et al., 2021).

The data collected at both sites was collected in 2013 and reanalysed for this present paper in 2023. The data collection included a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups with 52 young people, both in and out of tertiary education, comprising 24 males, 28 females, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as 56 local stakeholders engaged in supporting young people’s educational transitions post-school, such as school principals, community leaders, and local authority planners and policymakers (see Webb et al., 2015, for a report of the original data collection and analysis). The cultural and ethnic background of the young people was predominantly Anglo-Australian reflecting the population of the case sites, with 12 young people—just under a quarter of the study cohort—self-identified with other ethnic or cultural backgrounds, including one First Nations Australian participant.

Interview data was transcribed and analysed using an interpretive approach to explore the subjective meanings of young people’s im/mobility decisions to undertake post-school education. In addition, the analysis of the views expressed by the educational stakeholders, who these young people encountered or who had responsibility for educational provision in the area, also helped understand the context and influences on the views and decisions of these young people. We designate the regional youth as case site participants and others as ‘stakeholders’ in relation to the tertiary education participation of these regional youth.

Emerging Themes

The data collated from participants in the two selected areas were of particular interest, offering compelling themes around the geographical impediments to tertiary participation thereby enabling exploration of a nuanced understanding of rurality.

Eastshire. Eastshire was a comparatively large, but sparsely populated, rural-remote local government area in the far eastern edge of Victoria, located between high mountains and the sea where the predominant industry, forestry, had declined. Like the other selected case site (Southland in South Australia) it had areas of disadvantage but also wealthy landowners, tourism operators and the like, and limited employment opportunities. These milieux were also distinctly influenced by topographic factors as these Eastshire stakeholders stated: the area is “*socially remote from others, due to the topography of the area*”. Towns are nestled among the folds of the mountain range and are connected separately to the Princes Highway which forms the “*one major route*” (Eastshire stakeholder). This situation stated the same stakeholder means that “*by*

its very nature” there is a “big lack of public transport” and another Eastshire stakeholder said the focus is on “east-west” travel, “there’s nothing north-south”. In other words, these stakeholders’ use of the direction of travel - east-west - and the highway as the only means of connection across this area illustrate the geographical lines of connection and the barriers to travel across the area. More specifically, these geographical lines affect the opportunities for accessing tertiary education since there is only one road to the tertiary education campus, as one Eastshire stakeholder stated: “[the route to the campus involves driving] onto the highway, along the highway and then out across the highway again [to town]. So, the further [out] you live the more difficult it is.”

In Eastshire, a move away from home for tertiary education was a necessity, because “in terms of tertiary education, we don’t have access to it. Our young people between 15 to 24 actually literally need to relocate” (a stakeholder). Travel distances for most tertiary options in Eastshire are indicated by this stakeholder’s view “the idea of travelling two hours in the morning and night; that would be horrible”.

Moving away to study post-school invariably necessitates a solo move. Some young people who make this shift on their own “do fine,” said another stakeholder. However, as a far-east Eastshire stakeholder observed, “others are like fish out of water. They last six months and they come back, and they don’t know what to do from there on”, unconsciously invoking a habitus of staying put. The stakeholder emphasises that “there’s no doubt that [geography] does have an impact” because “that pull of home becomes a bit – you know you can’t just [come] home every – you know whenever something goes wrong and, yeah, you’re not going home to Mum and Dad every night”.

Here, tyranny of distance and geographic isolation of regional Australia (Alloway et al., 2004) were significant, but the impact was modified by the different ‘doses’ of the ‘staying put’ habitus that young people received. In the current study, some young people who demonstrated greater academic potential were often under more pressure especially from school-based advisors to move. Young people with parents who had experienced higher education and worked in professional roles in the regional area also tended to prioritise educational achievement and mobility over remaining in the local area. Typically, many of these more middle-class young people travelled out of the area often on a part-time basis to attend boarding schools in the urban centres and, in due course, pursue higher education there, too. The necessity of relocation was reflected, along with other factors, in comments by several Eastshire young people who reported adult “encouragement” (Corbett, 2000) to aspire to university, where this was felt as a tremendous pressure:

When I first finished high school there was a lot of pressure ‘You need to go to uni. You need to go to uni. You’re not going to get a job anywhere if you don’t go to university’, which is, I guess, is true... I think, three hours away to study, and that’s a pretty big indicator in people’s lives when they’re making their decisions because it kind of comes down to ‘Will I move away or will I stay here?’ (Case study participant, Eastshire)

Tertiary educational provision was very limited in this area, involving some diploma level study at a TAFE in one of the towns located two hours’ driving distance from the far eastern town in this area. The take-up of opportunities in Eastshire appeared to be somewhat dependent on the resilience of the dispositions of those concerned, and the borders they imagined or set out to cross.

Southland. Southland is a local government area south of Adelaide that encompasses the rural and spasmodically populated area described by one stakeholder as the “deep south”. Geographically, the area combined the rolling hills to the east, where farmland, wineries, and forest dominated and the peri-urban northern and western coastal areas. The peri-urban locations within Southland echoed the manufacturing story of elsewhere in the state whereas another Southland stakeholder claimed there were “serious pockets of disadvantage” as large-

scale employment opportunities in these areas had declined as global industries relocated manufacturing overseas, yet population pressures partly related to increased inward migration had led to a growth in new housing developments. The consequence of these changes led one school principal (a Southland stakeholder) to state that “*we also have quite wealthy families as well, so socioeconomically, it’s disparate*”.

In Southland, the themes emerging from the participants about whether to move away for education were different again. There was little mention of university in the focus groups. Only one participant was a university student and no one else aspired to, or mentioned aspiring to, university, which correlates with the census statistics that one stakeholder remarked on (see below).

While in what Southland stakeholders referred to as the *deep south* of the area, low tertiary education participation could be linked to tyrannies of distance. In the peri-urban Southland centres, there was what one Southland stakeholder described as a certain element of “*a psychological impost*” against moving – signalling “*strongly local*” affiliations. She said, “*I believe in terms of travel that people will not move out of that locality where students will say, ‘what can I do at [Southland TAFE campus]’, not necessarily, ‘what do I want to do’.*”

Similarly, one *deep south* Southland stakeholder summarised the challenge for young people to travel to educational providers in the northern reaches of the local government area as “*unless you’re very committed and have support and finance available that you can drive and so on, ... it does cause that restriction and that’s the sheer nature of the geography of where we live.*” This equated to “*very, very poor results... in higher education attainment*”. Even though a university campus was about a 45-minute car drive away, it may as well have been double the distance because of the geographic, topographic, and emotional borders between it and many of the young people of the *deep south*. The implications for these localities were significant, as one Southland stakeholder reported:

We’ve done a lot of work, we did geographical dimensions, ... the further south, the further you get away from the city, the less likely people go to university, so that shows up really clearly in our statistics through the census.

Situations, not Choices

In the context of student choice and opportunities, these two case study areas highlight the boundedness of young people’s perceptions. Many of the themes of post-school educational pathways were tied to deficit discourses of dislocations for individual young people and whole families and for those left behind, as “*there was a lot of people from our year that sort of headed off and it does put a bit of a dint on it all*” (case study participant). There were senses of failure for those returning without a qualification and for those not achieving university entrance qualifications and so not being able to leave; psychological imposts and tyrannies of distance limiting aspirations; financial limitations and the burden of pressures to attend university; difficulties, as one young Eastshire case study participant put it, “*to survive really*”. But amidst these presumptions and perceptions of deficit, we met some young people with ‘strongly local’ rural identities and beliefs who had navigated their situations in inspiring ways:

I think that it’s important that there’s no choices, there’s situations. That’s what leads to what you can do... you either can financially move or you can’t financially move and then you’ve got what you can and can’t do based on where you are. And the transport thing is just really quite huge in terms of where we are. (Case study participant, Eastshire)

Such geographical, financial, and infrastructural factors were found repeatedly across the research sites, where each is diversely enacted or experienced as variations on a theme and intersecting into distinctive accommodations to understanding the situations young people found themselves in and the choices that they perceived to be available in these contexts. The

factor of limited finances was hardly subterranean, given the focus on people from low socioeconomic postcodes, but finance was only one of several forces and was not always a constriction on aspirations. Transport, in terms of costs (petrol, registration, parking, and fares), but importantly, the geographical spread of this in terms of ready access to frequent and reasonable public transport and travel times, was another aspect that followed from these situations and affected perceptions of choices. Educational participation seemed to depend on how participants understood their situations and choices, in other words what they perceived to be the theme of ‘what you can and can’t do based on where you are’. And there were several variations on a ‘moving or not moving for education purposes’ theme across the sites, linked in part to financial considerations and what many participants referred to as “*the transport thing*” as well as the limited availability of localised tertiary educational institutions. However, importantly, we found that cultural dispositions were also influential in shaping the decision-making of young people from the most rural and remote locations in these two case sites.

In Southland, stakeholders, particularly those in the *deep south*, opined that “*we’re very overlooked in the south*” by government. One participant wistfully compared her area to the city and peri-urban centres to the north of the city which are perceived to be areas that received greater economic and education investment:

There’s not as much, the economy down this way is just not as blooming as it is out north. I don’t know if it’s just like they spend more money out there, they’ve got more businesses. I don’t know if it’s more populated, but I think because the southern it’s heaps more spread. (Case study participant, Southland)

As noted above, tales of bus travel travails in the “*spread*” *deep south* geography further emphasised a sense of difference, disconnection, and frustration. The implications of these particular ‘dispositions’ were significant, as a case study participant explained why he was reluctant to take up the offer of a construction apprenticeship, saying “*I’d travel probably up to an hour maximum. I don’t think I’d travel any further than that...you’re spending \$100 a week in petrol and then after tax as well when you’re being paid, it’s not a lot of money*”. As did another:

Public transportation from where I live is just pretty much no go, because . . . They come every couple of hours and you have to interchange a lot of buses. To get to Uni I’d probably take two hours. (Case study participant, Southland)

Given the ameliorating practices of schools to encourage tertiary education participation, several young people do make the geographical shift to study away from home, but the distance can be too much for some as this Eastshire stakeholder from a regional university noted:

Those that have got the aspect of a secondary school student going ‘I’m going to university’, they’re striving for that, that’s where they want to go. Those that haven’t the self-confidence for that sort of stuff are majorly inhibited and that’s a big barrier for them. It’s like, it means ‘I’ve got to live away from home. I’ve got to go there, no, too much, too scary. I’ll stay here and do a traineeship or an apprenticeship or work in a supermarket’. Their aspirations are cut short by that.

And others cut short their study away from home or seek alternative means to study online:

Kids might go away for 12, 18 months, 2 years, and then that pull of home becomes a bit [too much] (School principal, stakeholder Eastshire)

I talk to all my friends now because they’re still at uni. ...I’m just like ‘I wish I’d done that’. So now I’m at the stage where I’m looking online. Can I do an online university course or should I go now while they’re in their final year? (Case study participant, Eastshire)

There seemed to be a disconnect in policy-thinking about the geographical and social-emotional barriers between the support offered in rural areas to those in secondary education and those in tertiary education:

The minute they leave school or do VET [vocational education and training], VCAL [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning] or anything else, apprenticeship, their right to the school bus is gone. The policy makes no sense and that's what we've been arguing for. We're saying the way people are educated now has changed in the last twenty years. The policy has not kept pace. (Spokesperson for Eastshire Council)

The Southlanders' strong sense of attachment and belonging to their towns, infrastructure, services, and environments, in this case to the town on the coast, is similar and summarised by a stakeholder as *"I think the culture of [the town] is very much local, very strongly local. We are strongly connected into our local industries, the hospitals, the schools, the community environments, and the networks and so on."*

From this, it becomes clear that one needs to look beyond simple academic 'achievement' and young people's educational aspirations to understand patterns of participation in further education, work, and training among this student group. Indeed, each young person occupies a private socio-spatial context which needs exploration based on their observed educational 'choices' (Bowl, 2003) and supporting infrastructures. Individual circumstances are the outcome of numerous factors – socioeconomic status, geographical location, indigenous/non-indigenous background, parental influence, and engagement with mainstream schooling – which are all interwoven to either open up, close off, or obscure possible post-school pathways. As Bryce and Anderson (2008) and others (Hillman, 2005; Mills et al., 2011,) point out, a young person's socio-spatial location also affects their access to information about possible post-school pathways and their confidence in seeking out such information.

Importantly, despite the geographical differences and designations of these two case sites—one peri-urban and rural and one regional and remote—the two sites highlight many similarities in relation to the geographical, economic, and socio-cultural impediments that affect young people's thinking about whether or not to engage in tertiary education. These perceptions or put another way, young people's thinking about their post-school educational participation is informed by both material (transport and/or relocation costs, work requirements, and a lack of information on options), as well as symbolic (uncertainty about cultural isolation or strong ties to local culture) factors. Yet the experience of these similar impediments is often expressed differently because participants' accounts of their thinking are grounded in different locales.

Discussion

Discussions about participation in tertiary education at the two case sites revealed numerous factors apart from context-related mobility. The main factors which emerged as barriers to youth participation in higher education and vocational education options related to geographical and infrastructural features of the areas which impacted on the economic costs of tertiary participation. These factors included the limited number of higher and vocational education options in RRR areas and the escalating costs of travel and accommodation to access tertiary education, along with policy disjunctures in supporting mobility from different RRR areas and material factors such as housing and work (Hoefstede et al., 2022) opportunities. These findings support the broader picture emerging at the global level. However, this analysis also demonstrated that despite popular notions of the attractiveness of mobility for education, parallel socio-cultural factors such as relationality and reflexivity affected people's perceptions of their own motilities (Cook & Cuervo, 2020). The emotional context and networks young people engaged with (Corbett, 2015; Alexander, 2023) emerged as influencing factors for both leavers and stayers. Though not a focus of this paper, gender remains an ongoing factor in rural youth

mobility for tertiary education when young women perceive that local employment opportunities are more limited than that for young men. At the same time, many girls, like some young men, choose to remain local, marry young, and forego tertiary education participation. Nonetheless, Fleming and Grace's (2014) study reveals that among rural youth, more females than males tend to aspire towards post-secondary education. The literature, as well as the material drawn from the qualitative data here, reveal that a simplistic, deficit lens on rurality as a space of locational and socioeconomic disadvantage must be avoided and a more layered understanding developed of the issue at hand.

Considering the qualitative empirical research from the case sites enables the voices of the people to draw on their own sense of region-regionalism (Brown & Deem, 2014) as they characterise and discuss the impact of their home regions on their thinking about tertiary education participation. The study revealed that there were similarities across the two case sites, Eastshire and Southland despite their geographical differences and differences in their distance from the metropolitan areas of Australia. The education stakeholders and the young people highlighted the difficulties of geography, the distance from urban centres, and lack of nearby affordable education and training facilities as major restrictions on their post-school opportunities. The issues were, in some senses, common across both the case sites; these common issues were raised both in the regional-remote area of Eastshire, where travel distances could involve several hours travelling time and had to be by car (buses and trains were not available or did not run at appropriate times), as well as in the rural-urban fringe areas of Southland, where public transport was generally more frequent. At the same time, distinct but differentiated barriers were identified by participants and stakeholders in these two case sites. In the rural-peri urban area of Southland, the geographical and topographical features resulted in high financial costs and transport difficulties for participating in tertiary education. In Southland, these transport difficulties were perceived to make mobility difficult even for distances that car drivers would view as commutable. In Southland, there was a perception that the area was being neglected by state government and employers. Therefore, non-participation was the default disposition even though Southland was not as physically distant from the metropolitan facilities as Eastshire. In contrast, in the regional-remote area of Eastshire where the geographical distance to any tertiary institution was very great and financial costs and lack of public transport were also considerable, when young people tried to travel or move away for tertiary education, the social connections they retained to their home area and the importance of familial and friendship relationships were prominent in pulling them back to Eastshire. Such social connections helped to sustain the perceptions and dispositions of immobility for young people in Eastshire.

In both case sites, studying locally was the preferred mode, but this preference reduced the options available since not all education and training opportunities were available in each of these areas. In particular, the findings from these case sites show that even smaller distances from peri-urban areas to urban, or the complexity of travel within regional-remote areas, are major restrictions on post-school participation. These findings add depth to other research that has shown that lack of affordable and convenient public transport impacts even those who do not live very far from urban centres and, therefore, results in the necessity to migrate to a metropolitan centre to continue with any form of post-school education (Walsh & De Campo, 2010).

Limitations

Since this research data was collected in 2013, there have been several changes to the landscape of post-school education in the areas investigated that may affect opportunities, including for example, the withdrawal of one higher education provider in the area adjacent to Eastshire and its replacement by another with a more regional focus. Additionally, since the original data was

collected, the disruption to the idea of face-to-face attendance for education in schools and higher education, and even in employment, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, may have tempered the pressure to move to urban areas, increased opportunities to study at a distance, and modified young people's views about im/mobility. Furthermore, RRR areas in Australia are very diverse. Further research to study more ethnically diverse populations, and importantly, areas where many more First Nations people live, would be valuable.

Conclusion

There are symbolic and cultural barriers to participation related to moving away and identity challenges which have surfaced in this research, confirming Mills and Gale's (2007) foundational work relating to dispositions of rural and regional youth. Whilst the opportunities of post-school education are presented in the outreach and aspiration-raising activities of tertiary education providers, the literature argues that there is little discussion in these activities of the losses that young people may experience by considering different trajectories (see for instance, Alexander, 2023). that may be new to a community or family and may undermine or devalue received inheritances (Mills & Gale, 2007). Policy narratives using language about student choice and poverty of aspiration fail to understand the actual barriers described by the participants in the case sites which range from the abstract and emotional to the extremely concrete of transportation and financial barriers. As Bowl (2003) explains, the idea of choice delegitimises lived experiences, overlooks social disadvantage, and minimises the extent to which young people inhabit their own private socio-spatial context. Our study reinforces the idea that the perception of place plays a powerful role in influencing young people's geographic mobility (Alston & Kent, 2009; Drummond et al., 2013).

We outline how rurality can stretch from the outer margins of metropolitan areas to extremely remote areas in the lived experience of their inhabitants. We argue that 'geographic sensitivity' needs to be understood in terms of the impact of policy on the imagined aspirations of young people in their local contexts. In other words, policy and practice need to be shaped so that programs deployed at the local level engage with communities on their own terms.

At the same time, consideration needs to be given to the sheer natures of local geographies and topographies which influence socially distinctive patterns of opportunities in view of the multifaceted nature and impact of tertiary education. The forces forming localities and connecting people to the places where they live may not be readily measurable and, therefore, visible to distant decision-makers, but uncovering these attachments and connections is necessary to understanding the 'what you can and can't do' situations within which young people form educational, career, and life aspirations. In addition, other shifts are occurring. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is conceivable that unprecedented ways of thinking about engagement with young people in regional areas is emerging, with Teague et. al (2022) providing a survey of Australian institutional responses heading into the post-COVID era. Notably, this includes differing delivery of post-school opportunities, especially through external online studies, and the emergence of more localised approaches that reinforce the need for regional policies and initiatives that follow a more precise analysis and search for solutions at the local level.

The policy expectation of increasing tertiary education participation suggests that continuing with education post-school requires a geographical move – and a shift psychologically and emotionally – to want to move. Participants (the young people) and stakeholders in both case sites expressed this idea, but in the regional- remote area of Eastshire unlike the rural peri-urban area of Southland, this view was qualified by the expectation and/or hope that participants will return to the rural home, albeit in the future, or with the ambivalence that they might never come back. Geography made a significant difference in the post-school lives of the local youth,

but rurality was experienced differently in the remote case site compared to the rural-peri urban site.

Until these challenges are addressed, the issue of social justice in relation to rural areas in Australia will remain under-valued and under-utilised in relation to driving improvements. This is in contradiction to the principles of both inclusive education, notably in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration of the Council of Australian Governments, which in its Preamble commits to supporting all young Australians to achieve excellence in education, regardless of where they live (Education Council, 2019).

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

Catherine Thiele

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

Joanne Casey

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

Linda Eager

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

Susan Simon

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

Shelley Dole

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

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Regional, Rural and Remote Australia

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

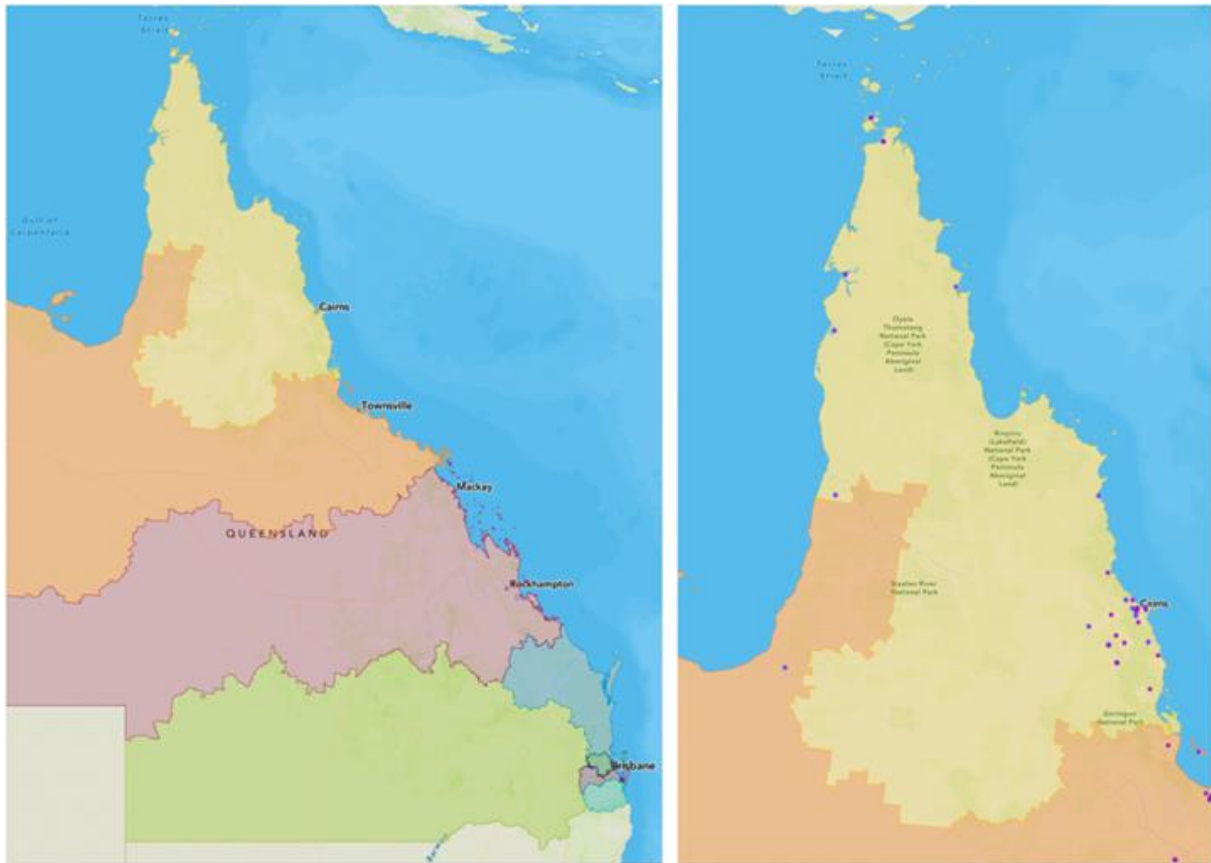
It is important to emphasise that the classification descriptions below are based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), therefore they do not address the nuances associated with each of the words ‘regional’, ‘rural’, and/or ‘remote’. The classifications and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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1: Map of Queensland and Far North Queensland Region (Department of Education, 2024a)

Preservice Teacher Place-based Experiences and Preparation Programs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leadership Complexity and the Role of Connectedness

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

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

Conceptual Framework

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

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

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

The TECe Program: Professional Experience Preparation Program

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

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

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

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

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

Research Design and Methods

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

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

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

Findings and Discussion

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

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

Key Connections (Actions) and Connectors (People)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Connecting and Connectedness: Pursuing, Developing and Maintaining Reciprocal Partnerships

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Far North Queensland. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

The authors disclose receipt of financial support for the research project.

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Bhutanese Teacher Educators' Attitudes Towards Information and Communication Technology Acceptance and use in Teaching: Implications for Rural Developing Countries

Tshering Tshering

University of New England
tsherinkenrig@gmail.com

Joshua Matthews

University of New England
jmatth28@une.edu.au

Rachael Adlington

University of New England
radlingt@une.edu.au

Abstract

Information and Communication Technology is a powerful tool for transforming education, and in developing, largely rural countries such as Bhutan, where its widespread access is relatively recent. Information and Communication Technology acceptance and use among teacher educators are crucial for effective contemporary teacher education. Acceptance and use depend on well-established factors, including teachers' attitudes; however, little is known about teachers' attitudes in rural developing countries, especially Himalayan and Buddhist countries, which are culturally different to other developing countries. Accordingly, this mixed-method study investigated how Bhutanese teacher educators' attitudes influence acceptance and use of Information and Communication Technology in teaching. Analysis of survey ($n = 90$) and semi-structured interview ($n = 21$) data indicated that teacher educators generally held positive attitudes toward its use. Age, gender, teaching experience and subject of specialisation did not influence attitude, while perceived usefulness, facilitating conditions and Information and Communication Technology use, did. Positive attitude was associated with perceived usefulness, while negative attitude aligned with Information and Communication Technology incompetence and slow internet connectivity. Some agreement exists between findings in Bhutan and other developing, rural contexts, however, differences in factors, including gender, and the presence of Buddhist *zhenphen* highlight the need for policymakers, researchers and interventions to account for context, alongside continued improvement of Information and Communication Technology infrastructure.

Keywords: *perceived usefulness, facilitating conditions, Bhutan, developing countries, zhenphen, ICT competency*

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving educational environment, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a pivotal force in transforming teaching in rural developing contexts. International organisations such as the United Nations emphasise the importance of ICT in education to “substantially increase the proportion of youth and adults with information and communications skills” necessary to achieve sustainable development (Sustainable Development

Goal 4)(United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p. 21), and aim to ensure that teachers have the requisite skills to use ICT for enhancing learning outcomes (United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2011). Similarly, the Action Plan of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Education Strategy 2016-2030 emphasises the use of ICT in education to improve quality, access, and relevance (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation [APEC], 2010). There is broad international commitment to achieving these goals, including aid to developing countries, such as Pacific nations (funded, e.g., by the Australian Government) (Asian Development Bank, 2018) and Bhutan, funded by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Wong, 2008, as cited in Kinley, 2015). Many developing countries are classified as rural in nature, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Serbia and Vietnam; and also Bhutan, where 57% of the population live in rural areas (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2024). However, compared with their developed counterparts, developing countries are still lagging in successful integration of ICT in education (Liu & Yuan, 2015).

The delayed progress of rural developing countries in using ICT in education can be conceptualised as originating from first and second-order barriers (Ertmer, 1999). First-order barriers to technology acceptance and use are external to the teacher and include training, support and access to resources. On the other hand, second-order barriers are internal factors, including users' attitudes and beliefs about technology (Ertmer et al., 2012). Governments invest heavily in ICT integration (Lawrence & Tar, 2018), focusing on first-order barriers, and governments of rural developing countries are no exception; for instance, Bhutan's national policies both position ICT integration as vital to preparing students for adulthood, and provide support to reduce first-order barriers (Ministry of Education, 2019; Royal Government of Bhutan, 2018). However, in the country's two colleges of education, despite national and international policy direction and funding for infrastructure, equipment and training, integration of ICT in pedagogy is still limited. Bhutanese educators use few ICT tools (Chewang, 2017), and ICT implementation is mostly limited to using virtual learning environments (VLE) (Choeda et al., 2016). Thus, second-order barriers are implicated in understanding why ICT is not better integrated in this and other rural developing nations in which first-order barriers have been at least somewhat met. Further, there are significant numbers of studies on the relationship between pre-service and in-service teacher attitude towards technology and ICT integration in developed nations, for example, in Taiwan (Hong et al., 2022), the United States (Ottenbreit-Leftwich et al., 2018), Australia (Reyes et al., 2017), and Belgium (Scherer et al., 2018). However, similar studies in developing countries are limited, and almost no literature examines Himalayan or Buddhist contexts. In response, the present study establishes the attitudes and beliefs of Bhutanese teacher educators and how these relate to ICT acceptance and use. It offers ways to increase technology integration in Bhutan, and provides a useful reference point for other rural developing countries.

Teacher Educators' Attitudes Towards the use of Information and Communication Technology

An individual's attitude guides behaviour in coherence with their feelings and thoughts (Semerci & Aydin, 2018), and attitude plays a vital role in the acceptance and use of ICT in teaching. In this context, attitude is the degree to which educators have positive or negative affect in relation to the use of ICT in the teaching and learning process (Lawrence & Tar, 2018); their feelings, likes, and dislikes about technology (Joyce & Kirakowski, 2014). As attitude guides behaviours, teacher attitude towards technology is an important determinant of technology acceptance and use in classrooms. This relationship is clear in countries well-established in using technology for teaching and learning. For example, Kreijns et al. (2013) studied the effects of Dutch primary and secondary school teacher attitude, social norm and self-efficacy on use of digital learning materials. Of these three factors, attitude had the strongest relationship with intention to use

digital learning materials. Similarly, in Korea and Vietnam university students' attitude was the primary factor determining acceptance and use of e-learning, and, the more favourable a student's perception of e-learning, the stronger their willingness to continuously use it (Jo, 2022). Positive attitudes towards technology are shared by educators in less developed, rural countries, however, the relationship between attitude and technology use is less straightforward. In India, teacher educators displayed a positive attitude towards technology-enabled learning (Adhya & Panda, 2022) as did teacher educators in Pakistan (Ahmed & Kazmi, 2020). Similarly, educators in Nigeria reported positive attitudes towards the use of instructional and web-based technologies (Ibrahim & Shiring, 2022). However, positive attitude does not always result in strong technology integration. For instance, in Oman, while university teachers had positive beliefs about and attitudes towards ICT use in education, this did not necessarily mean that they integrated ICT into their teaching processes (Abdelrahman et al., 2019). Similarly, Noori (2018) found that Afghan English as a Foreign Language lecturers demonstrated highly positive attitudes toward ICT use but only a moderate level of integration in their classrooms. Despite positive attitudes towards technology, reluctance to integrate technology in teaching persists in some places where technology use is still emerging.

Factors Associated with Teacher Educators' Attitudes Towards the use of Information and Communication Technology in Teaching

Educators' attitudes towards acceptance and use of technology in teaching across contexts is associated with several factors. Chief among these are *perceived usefulness* and *perceived ease of use*. Focusing on rural contexts, in Nigeria, teacher educators' positive attitude is associated with both their perceptions of the usefulness of the technology and how easy it is to use (Ibrahim & Shiring, 2022). Similarly, these two factors were positive influences on pre-service teachers' attitudes in Serbia (Teo et al., 2016). In Palestinian schools, Khlaif (2018) found the factors associated with teachers' positive attitudes towards the integration of tablets into their classrooms included that they improve quality of education, especially in rural areas (perceived usefulness) and are easy to use. Other studies note factors beyond perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. For instance, Khlaif and Salha (2022) found that Palestinian university students' attitudes and beliefs towards mobile technology integration were influenced by previous experience and social factors (influence of instructors and colleagues) alongside technical factors that facilitate ease of use, such as support from the institution and the quality of mobile service. Similarly, Xue et al. (2023) revealed that socially oriented factors regarding rules, community, and division of labour impacted on technology integration in Chinese universities, and technology integration was influenced differently in public and private institutions.

Just as there are factors that have a positive influence on the acceptance and use of ICT in teaching, there are also factors associated with negative attitude. For example, Herro et al. (2021) found that limited time, large class sizes, vast amounts of content to cover and little incentive to change practice impacted negatively on teacher educators' attitudes towards technology integration. Other negative factors include conservative rules about ICT usage and limited administrative support (Xue et al., 2023) as well as the perceived difficulty and complexity of ICT, and thus, time and effort required to use it (Teo et al., 2016; Wang & Zhao, 2023). Clearly, there are factors associated with positive and negative attitudes of teacher educators towards acceptance and use of technology in education. However, these factors are by no means universal, and little is known about the factors impacting attitude in developing Himalayan rural contexts like Bhutan, a gap in the literature that the current research seeks to fill.

Alongside perceived ease of use, usefulness of technology, and socially oriented factors, attitude is also influenced by educator demographics. Demographic factors associated with teacher educators, pre-service teachers and teachers' attitudes towards technology integration in rural developing countries include age (Ahmed & Kazmi, 2020; Makhoulouf & Bensafi, 2021; Noori, 2018),

gender (Ahmed & Kazmi, 2020; Cai et al., 2017; Makhlouf & Bensafi, 2021), teaching experiences (Ahmed & Kazmi, 2020), and ICT competency (Noori, 2018). For instance, Cai et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis of gender differences in attitudes toward technology indicated that, overall, males held a significantly more favourable attitude towards technology use than females, although these differences had small effect sizes. In Algeria, teacher age had a negative correlation with attitude (Makhlouf & Bensafi, 2021). In Afghan public universities, lecturers' demographic factors such as age, computer training experience, and computer competency were also found to significantly correlate with teachers' attitudes toward instructional technology (Noori, 2018). However, in nearby Pakistan and India, teacher educators' age did not influence their attitude towards the use of technology, nor did gender or teaching experience (Adhya & Panda, 2022; Ahmed & Kazmi, 2020). Relationships between demographic factors and educators' attitude toward ICT varies between rural developing countries and in different cultural contexts. Yet, there is limited knowledge about how the demographic characteristics of teacher educators influence their ICT acceptance and use in teaching in rural Himalayan and Buddhist countries, such as Bhutan, in which the demographics and culture are quite different to other rural Asian and middle eastern countries. Investigating the influence of demographic factors in Bhutan may provide valuable insights for policymakers and curriculum developers aiming to enhance ICT use in education both in Bhutan and rural countries that share similar demographic profiles intersecting with similar cultures.

Current Study

Numerous studies have explored the attitudes of teachers towards technology use in the school context, with a limited focus on university educators and specifically teacher educators. Existing research has primarily focussed on educator attitude rather than the relationship between attitude and factors that may impact ICT acceptance and use. Although there have been a few studies conducted on ICT integration in Bhutan (Chewang, 2017; Choeda et al., 2016; Kinley, 2015), and education more broadly (Kaka et al., 2022), none have specifically investigated attitudes of teacher educators towards ICT acceptance and use in teaching. The current study investigated teacher educators' attitudes and how they influence ICT acceptance and use in teaching and learning processes in Bhutan. This study also sought to reveal the specific attitudes and influencing factors within the rural Bhutanese context where technology is very new; indeed, in 1999, Bhutan became the last country on Earth to legalise television and internet, with mobile phones coming to Bhutan as late as 2003 (Wangmo & Cokley, 2009). As such, it builds on other scholarly activity that focuses on developing countries from a rural perspective, such as Serow et al.'s (2016) research on initial teacher education in Nauru. The current study offers insight for policymakers and education leaders in such countries on ways to change teacher educators' attitudes from negative to positive, which is crucial for the adoption and utilisation of ICT in teaching.

The following research questions will be addressed:

- (1) What are teacher educators' attitudes towards ICT acceptance and use in Bhutanese teacher education colleges?
- (2) What is the relationship between attitude and other factors that may impact on ICT acceptance and use?
- (3) Is there a difference between teacher educators' attitudes towards the integration of ICT in teaching by age, gender, teaching experience, and subject of specialisation?

Method

Research Methodology

The study adopted a mixed method approach chosen to address the research questions, which demanded a purposeful application of a multiple-perspective approach as attitudes are highly subjective constructs. Ethical approval was gained from the authors' institution (ethical clearance No. HE22-191) and from the two education colleges where data was collected. A survey was administered to 90 Bhutanese teacher educators who volunteered to take part in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 of these teacher educators to gain further insight.

Participants

Volunteering sampling was used to collect data from a total of 90 teacher educators who completed the online survey, with 79 valid responses (females: 28, 35.5%, males: 50, 63.3%). It is noted that due to the method of sourcing participants, the sample was not a random one. In total, 21 teacher educators volunteered and were selected for a semi-structured interview. The participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants*

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	50	63.3
Female	28	35.5
Age		
Less than 29	5	6.3
30-39	13	16.5
40-49	32	40.5
50-59	28	35.4
Teaching experience		
Below 10 years	6	7.6
10-20 years	19	24.1
21-30 years	45	57
Above 30 years	8	10.1
Subject of specialisation		
Science/Mathematics	24	30.3
Arts	24	30.3
Professional	30	37.9

Note. *One value missing as one respondent chose not to answer these demographic questions.

Instruments

Survey. The survey consisted of two distinct sections: one measured teacher educators' demographic information (gender, age, experience and subject of specialisation), and one measured their attitude towards acceptance and use of ICT in the teaching and learning process. There were 24 items under two sections and all items used four-point Likert scales, with 1

indicating *strongly disagree* to 4 indicating *strongly agree* (see Table 2). Items were piloted with a small group of teacher educators who were similar to the sample.

Table 2: Survey Items

Section A: Demographic characteristics				
1. My sex is:		3. My teaching experience is:		
Male		Below 10 years		
Female		11-20 years		
Others		21-30 years		
		Above 30 years		
2. My age in years is:		4. My Subject of specialisation is:		
29 and less		Maths/Science		
30-39		Professional		
40-49		Arts		
50-59				
60 and above				
Section B: attitude towards acceptance and use of ICT in teaching				
Components			1	2
			3	4
Attitude				
1. I like to integrate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in my teaching				
2. I like to use ICT to assess and evaluate students' work				
3. I feel positive about using ICT in teaching				
4. The use of ICT increases my job satisfaction				
Perceived usefulness				
5. I believe ICT has potential to improve my ability to teach				
6. The ICT integration in teaching improves the academic performance of learners				
7. Integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) enables me to deliver my lesson more effectively.				
8. Integrating ICT improves my instruction in the class				
9. Using ICT can save me a lot of time to teach the course materials				
Perceived ease of use				
10. It is easy for me to become skilful at using ICT				
11. I find it easy to integrate ICT in my lesson				
12. It takes too long to learn how to integrate ICT in teaching-Reversed				
Facilitating conditions				
13. A variety of computer software programs are available for use in the college				
14. I have received adequate training to incorporate ICT into my teaching				
15. IT support staff are available to support ICT integration in my teaching				
16. The technical infrastructure is not adequate in the college- reversed				
ICT usage				
17. I use ICT to keep track of students' learning				
18. I use technology to provide feedback to students				
19. I use technology to assess students' learning				
20. I use technology in a variety of ways to teach a lesson				

Note. 1. Strongly Disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Agree; 4. Strongly Agree

Semi-structured Interview. Following piloting and revision, ten interview questions based on teacher educators' attitude towards ICT acceptance and use were used for the study (see Figure 1). The 60-minute semi-structured interview applied a relatively open and flexible approach that allowed for in-depth dialogue during the interview, the opportunity to change the sequence of questions and an easy shift from one question to the next (Kallio et al., 2016).

Figure 1: Interview Questions

1. How do you feel about integrating ICT in your teaching?
2. Do you like integrating ICT in your teaching? (Why)
3. What can you say about your experience of using ICT in teaching?
4. As a teacher educator, is it important to consider using ICT in teaching?
5. What are the factors that influence your attitude towards ICT integration in teaching?
6. What are the factors that demotivate you to use technology in your teaching?
7. What specific characteristics of the technology influence your decision to use it?
8. What kind of knowledge or skills do you have to manage to integrate ICT in your teaching?
9. Do you consider yourself a confident user of ICT?
10. Can you share any other thoughts regarding ICT integration in education colleges?

Data Analysis

After establishing reliability, the mean scores from components within the survey were combined. The following components derived from the survey were applied in quantitative analysis: attitude, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, facilitating conditions, and ICT usage. To answer research question one, descriptive statistics were used to overview the trends in participants' attitude towards ICT acceptance and use. To answer research question two, Pearson correlation was applied to examine the relationship between attitude and other components such as perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, facilitating conditions and ICT usage. To answer research question three, mean score, Cohen's d value and Eta-squared were used to compute the effect sizes between teacher educators' demographic characteristics and attitude towards the acceptance and use of technology. The conventions for relative magnitude of effect size were drawn from Cohen et al. (2018).

Qualitative data was also used to answer research questions one, two and three. The qualitative data (interview) was analysed using the 6-phase methodology of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The recorded sessions were transcribed and imported into the digital qualitative data analysis program, NVivo. An inductive data-driven approach was applied at the semantic level. The following steps were undertaken to analyse the interview data:

- An initial familiarisation of data involving multiple readings of the corpus of participant discourse from semi-structure interviews
- The systematic generation of initial codes
- The collation of codes into provisional themes
- The review of themes and production of a thematic map
- Finalisation and naming of themes (Matthews, 2021)
- Conceptual maps and reference numbers were used to describe and interpret the data.

Results

Internal Consistency Reliability

Cronbach's alpha was calculated to determine the reliability of the items for each component of the survey. A minimum of .70 is typically considered adequately robust (Birch & Irvine, 2009). All components (attitude, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, facilitating conditions and ICT usage) were shown to possess acceptable magnitudes of Cronbach's alpha as shown in Table

3. When an item ('The use of ICT increases my job satisfaction') under the attitude component was deleted, the alpha was increased to .763.

Table 3: Internal Consistency Reliability

Components	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Attitude	.763	3
Perceived usefulness	.834	5
Perceived ease of use	.834	3
Facilitating conditions	.786	4
ICT usage	.869	4

Component Creation

With item reliability established, the means were used to combine the items for components. Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, facilitating conditions and ICT usage retained all of their items from the survey. For attitude, one item ('The use of ICT increases my job satisfaction') was omitted to increase the alpha value for the component. The kurtosis and skewness of each variable was shown to indicate adequate levels of normality of the data for all five of the components (i.e., between -1 and +1 for skewness and a value of close to zero for kurtosis).

Research Question 1

Quantitative Results. The overall mean of the attitude component (see Table 4) is 3.43, which is the highest among components. It inclines towards 4, which equates to strongly agree on the 4-point Likert scale applied in the current research. This indicated that in general, Bhutanese teacher educators had positive attitudes towards ICT use and acceptance in teaching.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the Components

Component	Number of teacher educators (N)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Attitude	79	3.43	.493
Perceived usefulness	79	3.34	.434
Perceived ease of use	79	2.69	.551
Facilitating conditions	79	2.44	.552
ICT usage	79	3.13	.518

Note: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly agree

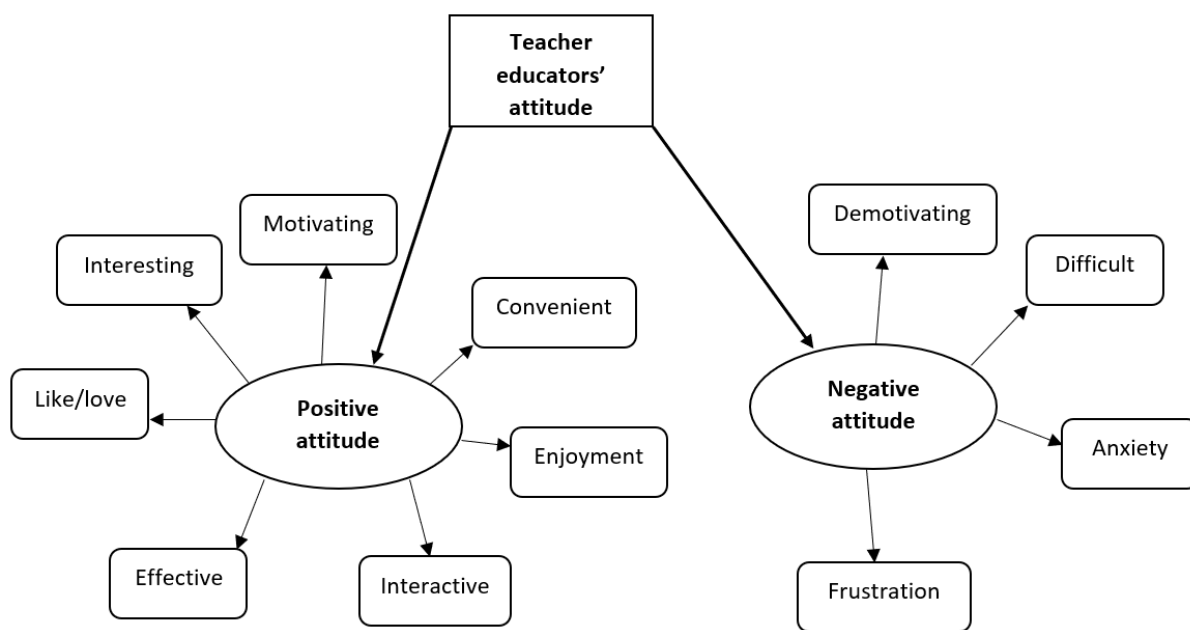
The mean attitude score was raised by teacher educators' higher ratings for items, 'I like to integrate ICT in my teaching' ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.637$) and 'I feel positive about using ICT in teaching' ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.595$). However, participant perception in relation to perceived ease of use and facilitating conditions was rated relatively low. The perceived ease of use scores appear to have been affected by teacher educators reporting lower competency for the following item: 'It takes too long to learn how to integrate ICT in teaching' (Reversed) ($M = 2.27$, $SD = .693$). The rating for facilitating conditions was lowest with a mean score of 2.44. The mean score of teacher educators' perception of existing facilitating conditions appears to have been affected by the following items: 'I have received adequate training to incorporate ICT into my teaching' ($M = 2.06$, $SD = .704$) and 'A variety of computer software programs are available for use in the college' ($M = 2.53$, $SD = .782$).

Qualitative Results. Thematic analysis of interview data resulted in two salient themes being identified: ‘positive attitude towards ICT’ and ‘negative attitude towards ICT’, seen in Figure 2. In total, 209 sections of discourse were coded, with 172 of these coded under the theme of positive attitudes towards ICT and 37 coded under the theme of negative attitudes toward ICT. Discourse coded under the theme, ‘positive attitude towards ICT’, was further classified into sub-themes including ‘like/love’, ‘interesting’, ‘motivating’, ‘convenient’, ‘enjoyment’, ‘interactive’ and ‘effective’ (see Table 5). Similarly, discourse coded under the ‘negative attitude towards ICT’ theme was further classified into sub-themes: ‘frustration’, ‘anxiety’, ‘difficulty’ and ‘demotivating’. The most prevalent sub-themes under positive attitude were ‘interest’ and ‘like/love’ towards use of ICT in teaching and learning, indicating that the participating teacher educators have ample positive attitudes towards ICT integration (see Table 5). The most prevalent sub-theme under negative attitude was ‘frustration’ when technology does not work as anticipated and due to inadequate resources.

Table 5: Key Themes Generated on Teacher Educators’ Attitude from the Interview Data Through Thematic Analysis

Themes	Sub-themes	Number of references	Example from participants’ responses
Positive attitude	Interest	49	TE15: “I am interested in integrating ICT in my teaching.”
	Like/Love	31	TE04: “I love integrating technology in my teaching”. TE10: “I really like to integrate technology in my teaching and learning.”
	Effective	30	TE18: “ICT integration makes a [sic] teaching very effective.”
	Interactive	28	TE16: “Using digital technologies make teaching very interactive. For instance, Nearpod makes teaching interactive and fun.”
	Enjoyment	14	TE20: “I enjoy integrating technology in the class.”
	Convenient	12	TE15: “ICT tools like Padlet are very convenient to use as it is easy to view and comment.”
	Motivating	8	TE12: “I am motivated to use to learn various technologies and use it in my teaching.”
Negative attitude	Frustration	14	TE01: “When technology does not work or we do not get access to the internet and other ICT facilities, things become a little tricky and frustrating.”
	Anxiety	6	TE20: “Sometimes the technology increases my anxiety in a class.”
	Difficulty	9	TE16: “It becomes very difficult for us to catch up new technology.”
	Demotivating	8	TE02: “I get demotivated due to low speed of internet.”

Figure 2: Thematic Map Showing Teacher Educator Attitudes Towards ICT Acceptance and use in Teaching



Research Question 2

Quantitative Results. Pearson correlation was applied to interrogate the strength of the relationship between attitude and other components—‘perceived usefulness’, ‘perceived ease of use’, ‘facilitating conditions’ and ‘ICT usage’. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients among these variables ranged from .12 to .56. Table 6 shows that attitude had a moderate positive correlation with ‘perceived usefulness’ ($r = .565, p < .001$). ‘Attitude’ had a weak positive correlation with ‘facilitating conditions’ ($r = .278, p < .013$) and ‘ICT usage’ ($r = .349, p < .002$). However, there was no statistically significant correlation between ‘attitude’ and ‘perceived ease of use’ ($r = .127, p = .266$).

Table 6: Correlations Between Attitude and Other Factors

Constructs		Perceived usefulness	Perceived ease of use	Facilitating conditions	ICT usage
Attitude	R	.565**	.127	.278*	.349*
	Sig (2 tailed)	$p < .001$	$p = .266$	$p < 0.013$	$p < .002$

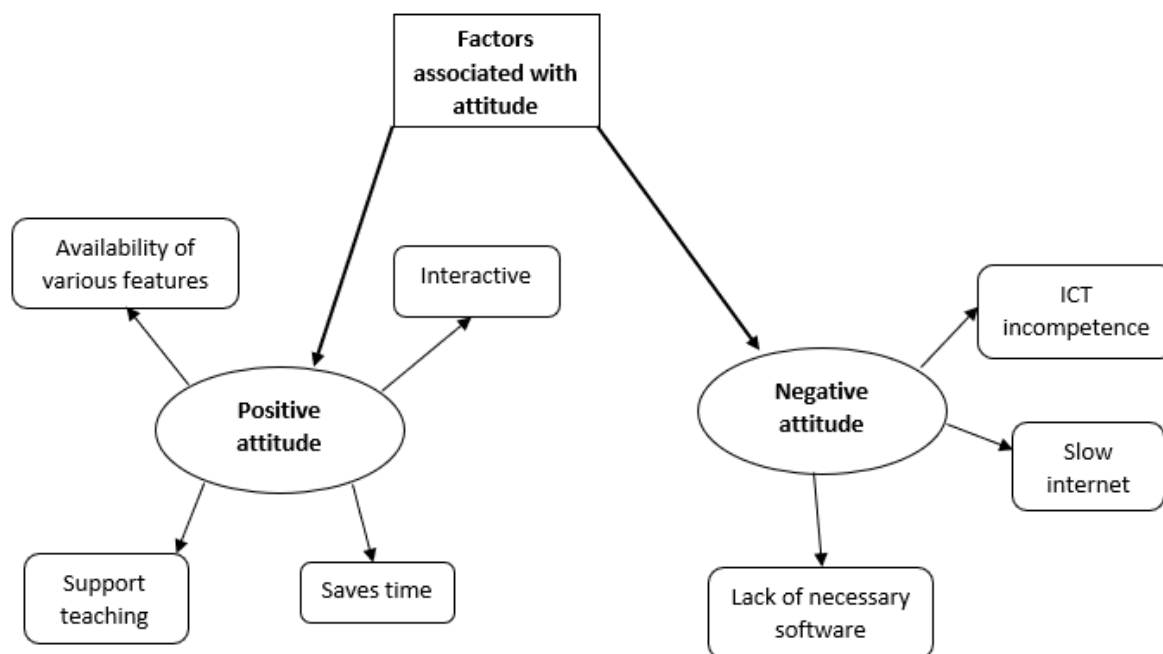
Note: * and ** denote significant correlations at the 0.05 and 0.01 significance levels. Significance results are only to be considered as indicative since the sample is not random.

Qualitative results. Thematic analysis of interview data further revealed that positive attitudes toward ICT were associated with following sub-themes: ‘availability of various features’, ‘interactive’, ‘support teaching’ and ‘saves time’ (Figure 3). The prominent sub-themes causing teacher educators’ positive attitudes towards ICT are the ‘availability of various features’ and making teaching ‘interactive’ (see Table 7). The negative attitudes towards ICT were linked to several sub-themes: ‘ICT incompetence’, ‘slow internet’, and ‘lack of necessary software’ (Figure 3). The most prominent sub-themes contributing to negative attitudes towards ICT are teacher educators’ ‘ICT incompetence’ and ‘slow internet’ connectivity at the college (Table 7).

Table 7: Key Themes Generated on Factors Associated with Attitude from Interview Data Through Thematic Analysis

Themes	Sub-themes	No. of refs	Example from participants' responses
Factors contributing to positive attitudes	Availability of various features	25	TE14: "VLE has many features and the features [sic] known as Debate is my favourite ICT nowadays."
	Interactive	33	TE20: "I enjoy integrating technology as it makes my lesson more interactive."
	Support teaching	5	TE11: "I like using ICT in my teaching as it supports my teaching."
	Saves time	6	TE21: "I use Padlet because it is very convenient. I can see everybody's response on one page. So, it saves a lot of time."
Factors contributing to negative attitudes	ICT incompetence	15	TE01: "I feel frustrated when I can't fully navigate and utilise technology the way I want to."
	Slow internet	5	TE01: "It can be pretty frustrating when you are not able to teach as you planed due to slow internet connectivity."
	Lack of necessary software	4	TE20: "I get frustrated when I do not get required software in the college."

Figure 3: Thematic Map Showing Factors Associated with Teacher Educators' Attitude



Research Question 3

The mean score for male teacher educators' attitude towards ICT acceptance and use was higher than female teacher educators as shown in Table 8. However, the effect size as measured by Cohen's d was below 0.5 indicating a small effect (Cohen et al., 2018). This indicated that gender

has negligible impact on teacher educators' attitudes. Regarding age, senior teacher educators' mean score was higher than young and mid-career but the Eta-squared value is 0.06 which is very low indicating no impact of age on teacher educators' attitudes. Similarly, the mean score for teacher educators having more than 30 years of teacher experience is higher than other categories, but a low Eta-squared value of 0.01 indicated no impact of teaching experience on the attitude. The mean score for Mathematics and Science teacher educators was higher than Arts and Professional teacher educators. However, a small effect size of 0.11 indicated neither subject of specialisation impacts the attitude.

Table 8: Teacher Educators' Attitude and Demographic Factors

Demographic category	Mean attitude	Standard deviation	Effect size Cohen's d (d)/Eta squared(η^2)
Gender			
Male	3.51	.504	d = 0.44
Female	3.29	.448	
Age			
Young	3.38	.585	$\eta^2 = 0.06$
Mid-career	3.32	.452	
Senior	3.59	.447	
Teaching experience			
Below 10 years	3.27	.443	$\eta^2 = 0.01$
10-20 years	3.43	.583	
21-30 years	3.44	.455	
Above 30 years	3.50	.563	
Subject of specialisation			
Science or Maths	3.66	.428	$\eta^2 = 0.11$
Arts	3.40	.450	
Professional	3.26	.520	

Discussion

This study investigated Bhutanese teacher educators' attitudes towards ICT acceptance and use in teaching at two education colleges in Bhutan. Although the relationship between attitude towards ICT and its acceptance and use has been considered previously in developed and developing countries (e.g., Cai et al., 2017), the current study provides further insight into the under-represented rural contexts and cultures of Asian, Himalayan and Buddhist countries, in which ICT is still a relatively new phenomenon. Attitude as a second-order barrier was also investigated by this study, which assumed that first-order barriers, such as access to hardware and infrastructure (Ertmer et al., 2012), are largely addressed in such countries, leaving second-order, internal barriers, such as attitude, the ongoing obstacles to effective ICT integration.

In consideration to the result of research question one, quantitative analysis revealed that among the five components ('attitude', 'perceived usefulness', 'perceived ease of use', 'facilitating conditions' and 'current ICT usage'), 'attitude' has the highest mean score. In general, then, Bhutanese teacher educators have positive attitudes towards ICT acceptance and use in teaching, which concurs with other studies in this field (Adhya & Panda, 2022; Ibrahim & Shiring,

2022; Noori, 2018). Despite positive attitudes towards technology, however, some Bhutanese teacher educators are limited in their integration of ICT in teaching, aligning with similar findings in other rural developing contexts (e.g., Abdelrahman et al., 2019; Noori, 2018). Nevertheless, most teacher educators held positive attitudes such as a strong 'liking/love', 'interest' and 'enjoyment' for ICT in their teaching. Participants also expressed that technology integration in teaching is 'convenient', 'motivating' and makes teaching 'interactive' and 'effective'. On the other hand, some teacher educators found ICT integration 'frustrating', 'anxiety-inducing', 'difficult' and 'demotivating'. Similar feelings are experienced more universally, for example, by pre-service (Rehmat & Bailey, 2014) and in-service teachers (DeCoursey, 2012) in metropolitan contexts. While most Bhutanese teacher educators had positive attitudes towards technology, as is the case in other rural developing countries, for teacher educators experiencing anxiety, frustration and demotivation, implementing strategies focused on making ICT integration less difficult will improve their use of ICT in teaching. Further, while shifting attitude will improve the use of ICT in teaching, understanding the relationship between 'attitude' and other factors that may impact ICT acceptance and use will assist stakeholders (policy makers, administrators, educators, etc.) target strategies to best effect.

Regarding the relationship between 'attitude' and other factors (Research Question 2), quantitative data analysis revealed teacher educators' attitudes had a moderate positive correlation with 'perceived usefulness' as in the case of other studies (Al Amin et al., 2023; Ibrahim & Shiring, 2022). 'Perceived usefulness' contributing to positive attitude was further defined in thematic analysis of interview data. For instance, the availability of various technological affordances and the value of ICT in making teaching interactive were prominent in the discourse of Bhutanese teacher educators with positive attitudes. This finding supports earlier studies where positive educator attitude was caused by the notion that technology facilitates teaching (Khlaif, 2018). Even though 'attitude' is not statistically significantly correlated with 'perceived ease of use', interview data analysis revealed 'ICT incompetence' as a main cause of negative attitudes toward ICT acceptance and use in teaching. Similar perceptions were noted in rural developing countries, such as Bangladesh (Al Amin et al., 2023). To this end, policymakers and education leaders in rural developing countries should focus on providing comprehensive training and professional development programs to improve general ICT competence and thus improve the use of ICT in teaching. At the same time, to foster positive attitudes, training and professional development should promote perceived usefulness of ICT in teaching by showcasing the technological features and the value of ICT for making teaching interactive. Furthermore, while perceived usefulness and ease of use are important, the power of social influence is not to be underestimated (Khlaif & Salha, 2022; Xue et al., 2023). As a Buddhist country, the people of Bhutan practice zhenphen, the Buddhist principle of acting to benefit others (Rabgay & Kidnam, 2023). Because of this, Bhutanese people are specially motivated to help each other. This goodwill may be leveraged to support people with lower levels of ICT competency and/or negative attitudes towards ICT. Further, people with positive attitude and high levels of ICT competency are likely to be very willing to mentor their colleagues. Efforts to develop positive attitude and ICT competence may be strengthened by considering the role of zhenphen in professional development, and this is an area for future study applicable to Buddhist contexts.

Quantitative data revealed attitude has a small positive correlation with facilitating conditions and ICT usage. As per the interview data analysis, another prominent factor that caused negative attitude in Bhutanese teacher educators was slow internet connectivity in the colleges, which inhibits ease of use. This undermined our assumption that first-order barriers were already sufficiently addressed in Bhutan. Clearly, in the Bhutanese colleges of education, the first-order barriers of poor internet connection and lack of necessary software persist. Further, the findings highlighted the connection between first- and second-order barriers, in which poor infrastructure (first-order barrier) results in poor attitude (second-order barrier). This is likely an issue of particular importance for other rural developing countries where infrastructure has been

provided but may still be lacking in quantity or quality. Following established frameworks, such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's *ICT Competency Framework for Teachers* (UNESCO, 2011) and Asia-Pacific Economic Corporation's *Education Strategy 2016-2030* (APEC, 2016), local governments and global partners must continue to provide infrastructure, digital tools, and training programs to empower educators in rural developing countries to leverage technology for better learning outcomes.

In response to Research Question 3, consistent with other studies (Adhya & Panda, 2022; Ahmed & Kazmi, 2020), there is no impact of gender, age, teaching experience and subject of specialisation on teacher educators' attitude towards ICT acceptance and use in teaching. However, other studies found that gender, age and experience do influence attitude (Cai et al., 2017; Makhlof & Bensafi, 2021; Noori, 2018), indicating demographic influences are context-dependent. While gender, age, teaching experience and subject of specialisation did not influence teacher educator attitude in Bhutan, gender is a significant factor in other developing, largely rural countries. Men and women differ in terms of ICT attitude and skill in Bangladesh and the Philippines (Rashid, 2016), and males still hold more favourable attitude towards general technology use than females in developed countries, including in the North American and Asian contexts (Cai et al., 2017). Bhutan, it seems, is bucking the gender trend in Asia that is attributed to social and cultural norms (Cai et al., 2017). One reason for Bhutan's difference may be that Buddhism sees men and women as equal (of note, Cai et al.'s (2017) study did not include Buddhist Asian countries). Notwithstanding persistent norms around gender, for example, about household chores and child rearing (Aguilar, 2013), Bhutan has also made special efforts over the past few decades to promote gender equality and become "*one of the most gender equal countries in Asia*" (Kotikula, 2013, cited in Aguilar, 2013, p1). As gender equality in other rural Asian countries improves, negative attitude among women towards ICT in education should also improve. In the meantime, to improve ICT use in all contexts, when gender is determined as a factor at play, interventions should be designed and targeted accordingly.

Conclusion

Enhancing the acceptance and integration of ICT in teaching and learning necessitates a crucial shift in the attitudes of teacher educators (Kreijns et al., 2013; Wang & Zhao, 2023). For the Asian, Buddhist teacher educators of the rural Himalayan country of Bhutan in the current study, while most educators displayed a positive attitude towards ICT acceptance and use, some expressed anxiety, frustration, demotivation and difficulty which deter technology integration. It is important to note that although the challenges faced by the teachers in the two semi-urban colleges (Paro and Samtse) are likely to be comparable to those experienced by teachers working in more remote rural areas, teachers working in even more remote rural locations are likely to experience even more pressing challenges in relation to the integration of ICT in their teaching. This is an important consideration when generalising the findings of this study more broadly across the country of Bhutan. Reluctance in implementing ICT is shared by educators in other rural developing countries, however, underlying factors that influence attitude in the first place are different in Bhutan. Perceived usefulness of technology has strong association with positive attitudes in Bhutanese educators, but this factor is not as prominent in other similar countries. On the other hand, feelings of incompetence are widely experienced in Asian developing rural contexts (e.g., Al Amin et al., 2023; Wang & Zhao, 2023). Similarly, while gender is a factor associated with attitude among many Asian countries, it was not a factor in Bhutan. This indicates the need for careful consideration of the contextual factors underpinning attitude to best leverage contextual strengths and target intervention in rural developing countries; while these countries may have similar levels of infrastructure and experience in using technology in education, not all influencing factors are homogenous, even among, for example, Asian countries. Indeed, more nuanced investigations of culture are warranted, and the present study

highlights as an area for further investigation—the relationship between Buddhism and attitude towards ICT acceptance and use, especially regarding the notion of zhenphen. Finally, first-order infrastructure barriers persist in Bhutan and influence the second-order attitudinal barrier. Rural developing countries like Bhutan, then, still need intra-governmental and global support to improve infrastructure as a fundamental driver of positive attitudinal shift, alongside initiatives that emphasise the benefits of ICT, including its interactivity and time saving capabilities.

In terms of limitations, this study focused solely on teacher educators in Bhutan and data was collected from among a relatively limited sample size, although it included participants from both of Bhutan's teacher education institutions. Further, it is important to note that given the nature of sampling and the relative size of the sample, there are potential biases within it. These limiting attributes of the current study's sample could be ameliorated in future related result through more extensive, random sampling. Findings are therefore limited in their generalisability, although there is some transferability to contexts or populations within similarities with Bhutan. Despite limitations, the current study applied a correlational approach to successfully map out the terrain of important attitudinal components in Bhutanese teacher education contexts, where the study determined that 'attitude' was moderately correlated with 'perceived usefulness', weakly correlated with 'facilitating conditions' and 'ICT usage', and not correlated with 'perceived ease of use'. To draw more robust conclusions around potential causality between factors like attitude and other important variables that are important in educational contexts in relation to ICT, other research paradigms like quasi-experimental approaches or longitudinal approaches need to be applied.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets used and /or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Towards a Framework of Culturally Responsive Boarding for First Nations Students

Simone Healey

Deakin University

simonekhealey@gmail.com

Glenn Auld

Deakin University

glenn@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

First Nations students from remote communities frequently make the choice to move to boarding school to complete their secondary education because of the limited educational opportunities in their local communities. To do this, students leave their family and peer support structures during adolescence. Although governments have provided funding for First Nations students to attend boarding school long before the Closing the Gap targets were set, outcomes of boarding for many of these students continue to disappoint, with low retention rates and below-average academic outcomes. Building on the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, a Culturally Responsive Boarding framework is proposed that reflects the unique needs of remote First Nation students. A rapid review included 21 peer reviewed articles about First Nations student experiences at boarding schools. The results were thematically coded to reveal that five Culturally Responsive Pedagogy strands were evident in the experiences of First Nations boarding students: having sociocultural consciousness; affirming views of students; acting as agents of change; learning about students and their communities; and culturally responsive teaching practices. Three additional strands emerged from the literature to generate an eight-strand framework of Culturally Responsive Boarding: building cultural safety in boarding; providing health and wellbeing services; and supporting aspirations. Most of the experiences analysed from the literature were negatively positioned relative to the strands in Culturally Responsive Boarding. The framework is limited because of the dearth of independent evaluations of boarding school outcomes for First Nations students. The proposed framework provides a pragmatic placeholder to support First Nations boarding students and their families until broader reforms happen across the boarding school sector in Australia.

Keywords: *First Nations, boarding school, remote, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive boarding.*

Introduction

Boarding school provides a range of educational opportunities for remote First Nations students that they would not have access to in their home communities. The colonial style of boarding, that the First Nations students are likely to face and the negative impacts this can have is well documented (Bobongie, 2017a; Mander et al., 2015a, 2015b; Pertl & Guerin, 2018; Rogers, 2017; Whettingsteel et al., 2020). Few students have the skills or support to manage the Institutional expectations at boarding school, which results in many withdrawing from the school (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020). Much of the current Australian boarding policy has a minimal focus on First

Nations student support and cultural safety (Standards Australia, 2015; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017). The legacies of the Eurocentric teaching is well entrenched in Australia and this has created structures in boarding schools that disadvantage students with cultures not recognised as mainstream (Martin et al., 2017). To counter structural inequalities in teaching, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy aims to make learning more contextual and culturally relevant by recognising the cultural diversity each student brings to the school (Taylor & Sobel, 2011). What is missing from the literature is how Culturally Responsive Pedagogy may inform the students' additional needs identified in a boarding setting. The authors of this paper propose a Culturally Responsive Boarding framework based on evidence from First Nations students lived experiences as identified from a review of the literature. Such a framework could be used to inform policy and guide schools and teachers to improve the educational opportunities for all First Nations boarding students, opportunities they are entitled to under the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council 2019).

The paper begins with a review of Villegas and Lucas's (2002a) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy framework. Each of the six Culturally Responsive Pedagogy strands of this framework is used as the organising structure of the literature review. The strands used include sociocultural consciousness, affirming views of students, acting as agents of change, building student learning connections, learning about students and their communities and culturally responsive teaching practices. This is followed by a description of the rapid review methodology and thematic data analysis. While there is extensive research about the policy and experiences of First Nations students at boarding schools there is no framework of Culturally Responsive Boarding to support the retention and learning of the students in these programs. The rapid literature review was a way of collecting evidence to shape the proposed framework. The results of the rapid literature review are presented as eight strands of Culturally Responsive Boarding. In the discussion, the political context of the application of the proposed framework is presented.

Researcher Positionality

Healey is a non-Indigenous scholar living on Wadawurrung land. She works beside First Nations boarding school students in rural Victoria and continuously sees the inequities in education and extensive challenges they face. In pursuit of social justice, she believes she has a moral obligation to act as an agent for change.

Auld is a non-Indigenous teacher educator who specialises in literacy education. His research focuses on strength-based approaches to student learning which struggles to gain traction on stolen land in neoliberal times.

Terminology

As this research includes voices from the sovereign peoples across the Australian continent and Torres Strait Islands, the use of the nomenclature of First Nations is used in this paper to acknowledge this. However, when citing previous research, the authors respectfully use the specific nomenclature used in the published research. If multiple citations are incorporated into a sentence, First Nations is the commonly used term.

Background

Villegas & Lucas (2002b) have a vision where:

culturally responsive teachers (1) are socio-culturally conscious, (2) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, (3) see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable, (4) understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction, (5) know about the lives of their students, and (6) design instruction that builds on what their students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar (p. 30).

These six ideas were used to organise the background framing of literature on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

Sociocultural Consciousness

Sociocultural consciousness is understanding how social inequalities continue to exist in education through societal connections, systemic discrimination, power imbalances and through the continuous privileging of Western worldviews (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). Culturally responsive teachers understand students will have different worldviews, based upon their varying cultural backgrounds, life experience (Perso & Hayward, 2020), social status and gender. The advantage of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is that it addresses systemic discrimination occurring where minority groups are not represented in mainstream pedagogy and organisational structures (Martin et al., 2017) and can disrupt the arrangements that reproduce social inequalities. This is important because a system discriminating against minority students, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, could arguably set many students up to fail (Guenther & Osborne, 2021).

Affirming Views of Students

Affirming views of students is based around three key ideas: (1) Teachers validating the students' multiple ways of knowing, (2) ensuring students learn mainstream knowledge while (3) understanding that students bring valuable knowledge and experiences to the school which helps their learning to progress (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). When teachers value the cultural capital First Nations student bring to the school, student diversity can be treated as an asset or resource (Lowe et al., 2021) and the students' knowledge, experiences and understandings provide a strong foundation for continued learning (Morrison et al., 2019). The importance of supporting and valuing Indigenous culture and identity within the education system has been shown to positively influence Indigenous student resilience (Rutherford et al., 2020) and a strong sense of cultural identity is linked to positive wellbeing and socio-emotional adjustment (Dockery, 2020). Affirming student views in a boarding school context may add to the student feeling supported outside of school away from home.

Acting as Agents of Change

To be considered an 'agent of change', teachers recognise that they have a moral responsibility to make schools more culturally responsive, and to facilitate student growth in educational settings that can 'serve as sites for social transformation' (Villegas & Lucas 2002a). Transformation of the learning environments in schools that realise the political and ethical purposes of education can only be possible when teachers choose to engage in disrupting inequitable practices. Equity in schools could be achieved by believing all students are equal (Perso & Hayward, 2020) and ensuring all students can access and reach the same educational success regardless of their cultural background. Embedded in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy are the principles of social justice that make positive change possible. Thevenot (2021) explains a social justice education policy is needed to provide innovative ways to transform education by creating educational equity and removing systematic barriers to student success. Evidence suggests that many Australian boarding school structures have limited respect for First Nations culture and cultural understanding (Whettingsteel et al., 2020). In these schools there have been reports of racism (Rogers, 2017) and suppression of First Nations student identity (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020). When staff in Australian boarding schools work to remove the structural inequalities facing students, they would be acting as agents of change.

Constructivist Views of Learning

Culturally Responsive Teaching is based on constructivist view of learning, where learners use prior knowledge and values to continuously make connections between pre-existing and new knowledge. Culturally Responsive Teaching approaches student cultural diversity as an asset and

integrates these assets into engaging and motivating learning activities (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). Teachers from privileged backgrounds often struggle to connect to students from marginal backgrounds who are learning new content that appears irrelevant to them (Perso & Hayward, 2020). This would likely lead to further entrenching educational disadvantage for First Nation students who may question the purposes of boarding away from home.

Learning About Students and Their Communities

Deeper understandings of students' home lives and community enable teachers to get to know their First Nations boarding students (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020; Perso & Hayward, 2020). This includes knowing about the student's life outside school, their family and social life as well as prior knowledge, history, primary language, belief systems and belief in education (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). By learning about students and their communities, teachers may avoid stereotyping First Nations students who often come to boarding school from home communities that may have very diverse lifestyles, geographic locations, histories, languages and cultural practices (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020). Where teachers have inadequate background knowledge of students, teachers have been known to assume what and how the students have been previously taught (Perso & Hayward, 2020) and how they can best learn. Morrison et al. (2019) identify the importance of being 'connected to students' life-worlds' and forming quality 'relationships' between teachers, students, student peers, families, and communities and these are as major components of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. By understanding similarities and differences between the students' cultural background and values, and those of the school, teachers can build strong relationships that pay dividends in learning outcomes.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Culturally Responsive Teaching practices include involving students in the construction of knowledge, making classrooms inclusive, broadening curriculum, providing varied assessments, building on students' personal and cultural strengths and drawing on expertise from community members (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). Strength based approaches to First Nations student learning has been identified as an indicator of student success in remote communities (Guenther et al., 2015) and has been advocated in approaches to literacy teaching (Fogarty et al., 2018). Culturally responsive teachers may ask Elders into the school to share their cultural knowledge, bringing benefits to staff and students across the school (Rigney et al., 2020). Lowe et al., (2021) have argued that there are "*positive consequences arising from Aboriginal people actively mentoring non-Aboriginal educators in order to develop culturally responsive approaches to curriculum and pedagogy*" (p.473). First Nations student success in classrooms has been linked to the high expectations teachers have of their students in school classroom (Sarra et al., 2020).

Limitations of Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Despite many advantages, previous studies have identified limitations of Culturally Responsive Teaching. Martin et al., (2017) identified the following structures working against Culturally Responsive Teaching in the context of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in teacher education; "(1) *abyssal (or colonial) thinking*; (2) *the hegemony of westernised versions of what counts as education*; (3) *discourses of marginalisation and othering*; and (4) *the hegemony of the English language*" (p.241). Furthermore, the way teachers interpret Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is not always aligned with its principles. Ladson-Billings (2017) suggests that teachers who think they are enacting Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, frequently focus on what the students are interested in learning rather than focusing on learning that matters in the lives of the students.

In the context of these structural and practice limitations of Culturally Responsive Teaching, the proposed framework of Culturally Responsive Boarding is offered to support staff in their enactment of the dimensions of care to First Nations boarding students.

Methodology

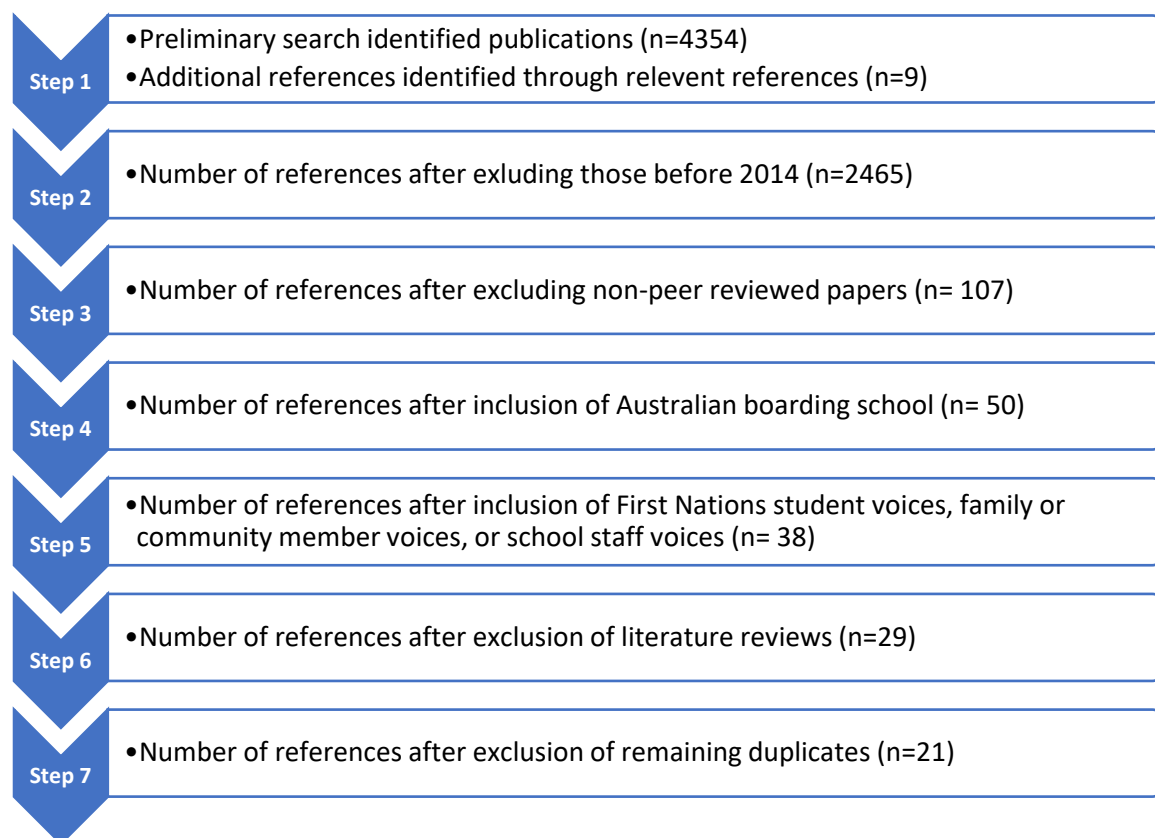
The methodology chosen to address the research aim is a rapid review. Rapid reviews contain the elements of a systematic review, however the process is streamlined to produce the required information on a shorter timeline (Tricco et al., 2015). A rapid review was used in this unfunded project that aimed to propose an argument for Culturally Responsive Boarding. While authors acknowledge the limitation of the scope of rapid review compared a more substantial systemic review, there is enough evidence in the literature generated from the rapid literature review to propose the Culturally Responsive Boarding framework.

The preliminary literature search was conducted through the ERIC, EBSCOHost and Informit databases, as well as Google scholar. Additional sources were identified by utilising relevant references found in the literature of the preliminary search. The searched literature included the use of academic journals and books and the following search terms were used: “Boarding school” AND “Indigenous Australians” OR “Aboriginal Australians” OR “Torres Strait Islanders” OR “First Nations Peoples”.

The preliminary search identified 4354 records (see Figure 1). To assess the eligibility of the publications the following inclusion criteria was used: (a) published between 2014 – 2023; (b) is peer reviewed; (c) boarding school is Australian; (d) included First Nations student voices, family or community member voices, or school staff commenting on their reflections of caring for First Nations students. Following the application of inclusion criteria (a) and (b), the titles and abstracts of papers were read to determine if they met inclusion criteria (c) and (d). Publications were excluded if they were literature reviews and duplicate references were removed. This resulted in the exclusion of 4342 publications, leaving 12 relevant publications to be included. Nine additional records identified in relevant references met the inclusion and exclusion criteria and were included in the sample. A final sample of 21 relevant publications that addressed the criteria were included in the research.

Braun and Clarke’s (2013) thematic analysis procedure was used to analyse the included published articles using a deductive approach with the themes generated from the Villegas and Lucas’s (2002a) six strands of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy . Although there are numerous Culturally Responsive Pedagogy frameworks, Villegas and Lucas’s (2002a) framework was chosen as it resonated with the authors’ understandings of the outcomes of students in Australian boarding schools as indicated in the Boarding School Standards (Australian Standards 2015). Additional themes were created that did not fit into any of the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy strands.

This research project used a rapid literature review method using publicly available published peer reviewed data and is therefore exempt from ethics approval. Ethics exemption for the study was granted by the Deakin University Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Advisory Group. Exemption reference number: 2022-289. We are conscious that this work is intended to impact First Nations boarders and we have tried to use respectful language in the terminology in this study that reflects the complexity of Australian boarding context.

Figure 1: Search Strategy

Results

This rapid review aimed to identify how well First Nations student experiences in boarding schools are aligned to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and what needs to be adjusted and added into Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to generate the proposed Culturally Responsive Boarding framework. Using a deductive approach, five of the six interconnected strands of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy were highly visible in the literature. The strand that was omitted was *constructivist views of learning*. Within the literature reviewed, there was no evidence to suggest that it was a determinant of success in the boarding school experience, despite being an important strand to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Three additional themes emerged as important dimensions to boarding schools that are not covered by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy which include building cultural safety in boarding, providing health and wellbeing services and supporting aspirations. Table 1 maps First Nations boarding experiences with the strands of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and those identified in Culturally Responsive Boarding.

Table 1: First Nations Boarding Experiences as Culturally Responsive Boarding

Publication	Culturally Responsive Boarding							
	Having sociocultural consciousness	Affirming views of students	Acting as agents of change	Learning about students and their communities	Culturally responsive teaching practices	Building cultural safety in boarding	Providing health and wellbeing services	Supporting aspiration
Benveniste et al., 2020	√		√	√	√	√	√	
Benveniste et al., 2019	√	√	√	√		√	√	
Bobongie, 2017a		√		√				
Bobongie, 2017b		√	√	√	√			
Guerin & Pertl, 2017	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Lloyd, 2020	√	√	√	√	√			
Macdonald et al., 2018	√	√	√	√	√			√
Mander et al., 2015a	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Mander et al., 2015b	√	√		√	√	√		√
Mander, 2015	√			√	√			√
McCalman et al., 2020				√			√	
O'Bryan, 2021	√	√	√					
O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020	√	√	√	√	√			√
Pertyl & Guerin, 2018		√	√			√		√
Redman-MacLaren et al., 2021		√		√				
Rogers, 2017		√	√	√				√
Rutherford et al., 2020	√	√		√	√	√	√	
Seymour & Guerin 2018		√		√				√
Stewart, 2021	√	√	√	√		√		√
Walker, 2019				√				
Whettingsteel et al., 2020		√				√		

√ = included

Having Sociocultural Consciousness

The theme of having sociocultural consciousness, or lack thereof, was one of the more dominant themes identified in the literature. This section highlights the occurrence of culture shock for First Nations students, as they experience a change in value systems and the social inequalities that come with structures of systemic discrimination.

The literature review highlighted common challenges that make flourishing for First Nations boarding students incredibly difficult. Boarding schools were found to embed Western based educational and social values (Benveniste et al., 2019) and practices of institutionalised racism (Macdonald et al., 2018). Mander et al., (2015a) identified that some staff expressed prejudice, stereotypes and racism to varying degrees in interviews. One study by O'Bryan & Fogarty (2020), found that some staff understand the complexities faced by First Nations students; identifying language barriers, distance from home, health, parent communication, and the challenges brought about by years of “*intergenerational exclusion from education systems*” (p. 59). Culture shock was recognised by both staff (Mander et al., 2015b) and students (Mander et al., 2015a) as a common occurrence when First Nations students transitioned to boarding school. Aboriginal students in one study (Mander et al., 2015b) found they needed to ‘code switch’ between their cultures, with some students feeling as though they needed to suppress their cultural identity while at school. Some staff believed students needed to accept the change and switch between systems, while other staff were concerned about the impact it had on the students’ identity and wellbeing (Mander et al., 2015a). In another study, a staff member valued the opportunity to visit a First Nations community which ultimately made the staff member question and change their perceptions of Western values (Lloyd, 2020). This identifies the shift in thinking that occurred with greater contextual understanding. Although student involvement in the decision to attend boarding school varied between students, for many students, attending boarding school was ultimately a choiceless-choice as local schools did not have the resources required to complete their secondary education (Mander et al., 2015b). Parents were faced with the ethical dilemma of sending their children away. Many felt frustrated that keeping their children in their local community was simply not a viable option (Stewart, 2021). In a study of parental perceptions of boarding schools, Mander (2015) found that some parents experience emotions of “*guilt, stress, loneliness and sadness*” (p. 176) and question their worthiness as parents.

Affirming Views of Students

Affirming views of students included teachers having a belief that all students were capable learners with mainstream knowledge. Validating student perspectives recognised the multiple ways of knowing, valuing culture and enabling connections with First Nations peers.

For many students, having a teacher believe they could achieve was crucial to their engagement, self-belief, and academic success. An Indigenous student explains “*Teachers here are real helpful; they want to get you somewhere. If you put in you get out*” (Pertl & Guerin, 2018, p. 84). Students felt teachers showed respect for their culture when they were not penalised for being different, but rather demonstrated an understanding of their cultural norms and “*allowed them to think and act in Aboriginal ways*” (Macdonald et al., 2018, p. 206). In the boarding house, students identified that they didn’t belong when they were not allowed to speak their native language, there was a lack of culture in the boarding house, or other students responded negatively to Indigenous cultural norms (Bobongie, 2017b). Other students described the boarding house as ‘unwelcoming’, and that there needed to be more connection to Aboriginal culture to give them a greater sense of belonging (Whettingsteel et al., 2020). Students also worried that their cultural identity was lost around the boarding school (Rogers, 2017). Some students felt that acknowledging Indigenous events at schools was a sign of inclusivity (Rutherford et al., 2020), while others felt it must go beyond this (O’Bryan, 2021). Several teachers felt a genuine whole school inclusive approach was essential for Indigenous student retention and recognised the need to have more cultural activities and greater support for cultural practices such as ‘sorry business’ at the school (Bobongie, 2017a). Students felt their culture was respected and valued when teachers showed interest in them and were prepared to help them learn (Bobongie, 2017b). Learning their peers’ culture was something some Indigenous and non-Indigenous students valued (Lloyd, 2020) and when culture and cultural identity was valued, student resilience at boarding schools was shown to increase (Rutherford et al., 2020).

Students believed a crucial aspect of their success was their connection and strong friendships with other Indigenous students at the school (Pertl & Guerin, 2018; Redman-Maclaren et al., 2021). These connections improved retention (Stewart, 2021). First Nations student mentors were also perceived to be highly useful (Benveniste et al., 2019; Mander et al., 2015a), excellent role models (Mander et al., 2015b) and helped build the new students' social skills (Rutherford et al., 2020). Older First Nations students who had experienced much of what the new students were going through were able to offer support. Boarding provided First Nations students with the opportunity to learn mainstream independent skills (Rogers, 2017), achieve education qualifications and secure employment (Macdonald et al., 2018). The literature revealed that schools varied in how they valued First Nations student views. There was strong evidence that when students completed their secondary education, the mainstream knowledge that they gained from their boarding school experience was beneficial for their future success (Macdonald et al., 2018, Rogers, 2017).

Acting as Agents of Change

Acting as agents of change included the importance of having the right staff and support for staff to enact social change, and a recognition of the inequalities, power imbalances and reproductive tendencies in boarding schools. To act as agents of change, boarding staff needed to be culturally responsive to the specific needs of First Nations boarders and the inequities that contextualise their learning away from home. One study found that working with Aboriginal boarding students was effective when there was support from leadership, when the 'right' staff were employed and when plans were in place to specifically support the students (Benveniste et al., 2020). Further to this, another study found that students valued staff who were relaxed but still had boundaries, could empathise with the Indigenous students' circumstances and could respond in ways to best support them (Stewart, 2021). Teachers found it challenging when they had not worked with Indigenous students before, had not had the cultural training to grasp the complexities of the situation or did not have support from the school (Guerin & Pertl, 2017). In one study, a teacher believed that they had the obligation to better support oppressed groups and another wanted to empower Aboriginal students to speak up with confidence and address the injustices they had faced (Mander et al., 2015a).

The reproductive nature of schools often resulted in a continual cycle of inequality whereby First Nations students were disadvantaged. In one study, a student described their hope for a neutral power balance in education with more connection between community and the school (Lloyd, 2020). Some staff believed that building this connection and strong relationships was challenging due to the "*intergenerational exclusion from education system*", as well as language barriers, geographic distances, internet access and digital literacy in First Nations communities (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020, p.59). The literature identified the power relations between teachers and students impacted student agency in boarding schools. O'Bryan (2021) described the power dynamics in Australian education as "*visible to the naked eye*" (p. 16) and levels of power and cultural biases were made clear to a First Nations student when his request of having the First Nations flag up at the school was rejected. Parents were made to feel "*powerless*" when their children were suspended in what they feel "*unjust*" circumstances and communication with the school was limited (Stewart, 2021, p. 125). All the while several Indigenous students believed a good school was one that was simply respectful, empathetic and treated them fairly (Stewart, 2021). It was believed by both parents (Mander, 2015) and staff that the educational disadvantage Aboriginal students faced was linked to wider social issues, with staff feeling "*anger*" or "*frustration*" about this ongoing issue (Mander et al., 2015a, p. 318). For some students, attending boarding school brought into focus the disadvantage and inequalities they faced, making them question if they even belonged in such a privileged environment (Mander et al., 2015b).

First Nations boarding students faced racism and cultural ignorance. Indigenous students described being treated differently because of their skin colour, given funny looks, called names

and treated like five-year-olds (Pertl & Guerin, 2018) as well as feeling unwelcomed, being left out (Bobongie, 2017b) and being subject to drug use stereotypes (Macdonald et al., 2018). Indigenous students felt that some non-Indigenous students had no understanding of the socioeconomic disadvantage they faced and had no interest in trying to understand it (Macdonald et al., 2018). A lack of understanding and support towards Indigenous cultural practices such as “*sorry business*” caused anxiety, anger and distraction in students when they were not allowed to go home to grieve with their families (Rogers, 2017, p.9).

Learning About Students and Their Communities

Learning about students and their communities was another dominant theme in the literature which included a strong focus on the importance of relationships, understanding student life outside the school and how they previously learned. Relationships between students, student and staff, staff and family and the school and community were crucial to successful outcomes for First Nations boarding students (Lloyd, 2020; Mander et al., 2015a). For staff, building strong relationships with the students was essential (Benveniste et al., 2019; Guerin & Pertl, 2017). This was achieved through conversations and showing interest in where they come from (Mander et al., 2015a) and having a flexible approach (Guerin & Pertl, 2017). Students also indicated that building strong friendships with other First Nations students in the boarding house through social events was vital (Mander et al., 2015b). In another study a school nurse explained the importance of having good relationships with students so that they could ‘yarn’ in a safe place and then receive the care needed (McCalman et al., 2020). Along with relationships at the school, relationships with First Nations communities were also imperative. Studies identified that school or staff visits to their students’ First Nations community was important (O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020; Stewart, 2021) where they could experience First Nations culture ‘on country’ (Lloyd, 2020). One family member interviewed by Stewart (2021) commented on the limited knowledge boarding school staff had about caring for Aboriginal children. They stated ‘Do the teachers and boarding parents in these schools even know how to look after Aboriginal boys and girls? They need to come here and talk to us, show us who they are and talk to us about looking after our kids’ (Stewart, 2021, p.125). This research highlighted the stress felt by the family when sending their children away, the importance of building strong relationships and knowing about the student’s life.

Knowing Aboriginal student cultures through professional learning has been found valuable (Benveniste et al., 2019; Mander et al., 2015a) in the context of school boarding. Without professional learning on cultural responsiveness, staff indicated that they felt ill-equipped to manage the students and made “*cultural mistakes*” (Guerin & Pertl, 2017, p.59). Being responsive to the challenges many students faced such as homesickness (Walker, 2019), missed cultural obligations (Bobongie, 2017b) and the trauma that some may carry with them from their lives at home (McCalman et al., 2020) would be integral to the care and flexibility required to support the students. Knowing the students also included understanding their previous educational experience. Some students at boarding school described their previous primary schooling experience in their home community where they attended only one to two days per week, not bothering to go or getting up around noon (Pertl & Guerin, 2018). There were also complex reasons for students leaving boarding school. Some of the reasons students discontinued boarding included family responsibilities, exclusion, fighting, difficulties with staff and wanting to go home to their community as they had no other community members at the school (Walker, 2019). Interestingly, students across two studies regretted dropping out, (O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020; Walker, 2019). First Nations parents described drop out as “*normalised*” and Elders raised the concern that when this happened, students were not learning to work through their problems (O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020, p.63).

CRT Practices

The theme CRT practices highlighted the challenges many First Nations boarding students faced when moving to boarding school including academic disadvantage, difficulties connecting to the curriculum and language barriers. It also identified the importance of having a culturally inclusive school and curriculum to support motivation and engagement.

With much of the curriculum “white-washed” (Macdonald et al., 2018, p.210), First Nations students found it difficult to connect to the content to make learning relevant. Students described the academic schoolwork as “really hard” and “stressful” and felt unmotivated and unprepared, with some developing low self-esteem in the classroom (Mander et al., 2015b, p.31). Staff recognised how the limited previous educational experiences available to remote First Nations students (Guerin & Pertl, 2017) left the students underprepared for boarding school (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). Both teachers and students indicated that a major barrier for many First Nations boarding students was that English was not their first language (Bobongie, 2017b; Mander et al., 2015a). One student in Bobongie’s (2017b) study commented “*My biggest challenge was speaking English because I didn’t—I’ve had a few sentences here and there in primary school, but I’ve never actually spoken a whole paragraph of English*” (p.1146). Culturally Responsive Teaching would value this linguistic capital as a way of making the shift to content delivered in English.

Building bridges between previously learnt and new concepts was particularly important, with teachers explaining how the use of relational learning was an effective teaching strategy (Guerin & Pertl, 2017). In one study a teacher described the difficulty of getting any work out of a student, while when other students completed an assignment relating to their culture, motivation increased significantly (Guerin & Pertl, 2017). In another study, the benefits of a boarding model where the Indigenous students learnt from non-Indigenous students and vice versa were considered mutually empowering (Lloyd, 2020), creating more culturally inclusive spaces in the boarding house.

Building Cultural Safety in Boarding

The theme ‘building cultural safety’ in boarding considers the time students spend in the care of boarding house staff when they were not in the classroom. This included weekends and time before and after school each school day. First Nations students faced challenges when there was no respite from operating in a non-Indigenous context. It also addresses the essential need for a flexible boarding approach and for giving students a high level of ownership to provide them with a sense of belonging.

The sheer contrast between the two worlds First Nations students’ experience, from living in their home community to a boarding school cannot be underestimated. One parent described this as sending their son to Mars (Guerin & Pertl, 2017). The highly structured boarding and school environment was frequently mentioned as being significantly difficult for students. Across several studies, students referred to the structures and rules as challenging to adjust to (Guerin & Pertl, 2017), that there were too many rules (Pertl & Guerin, 2018), they struggled with the lack of freedom (Mander et al., 2015b), and that the structure was a barrier to a sense of belonging (Whettingsteel et al., 2020). In one study, where structural challenges were recognised, a staff member identified Indigenous students having trouble managing time and another student felt a more flexible approach would lead to greater productivity (Guerin & Pertl, 2017). This was supported by a student explaining how there needed to be balance between essential structures in the boarding house and giving the students autonomy and flexibility (Whettingsteel et al., 2020).

Providing Health and Wellbeing Services

The second theme that emerged outside Culturally Responsive Pedagogy was providing health and wellbeing services. This included the array of health conditions First Nations students needed at the school, the barriers that limit the health provision and strategies that support health and wellbeing.

A recent study by McCalman et al., (2020) found that many Indigenous boarding students reported a lower social wellbeing than their non-Indigenous peers and they brought with them “*diverse and complex physical health and social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) issues that impacted their ability to participate in school life and learning*” (p.4). The study found that although schools acknowledged that they had a duty of care to look after Indigenous students’ health and wellbeing, several staff described the barriers as being the lack of resources, associated costs, lack of staff Indigenous cultural training and alternative worldviews (McCalman et al., 2020). This warrants the ethical question of why schools can enrol First Nations students in boarding and accept government funding, when they were not able to provide the health care required to support the students. Despite these barriers, strategies that were found useful in supporting First Nations students health and wellbeing included having a pastoral care plan for each student, liaising with transition support staff (Benveniste et al., 2019), having older students mentor younger students, using a daily check-in app (Rutherford et al., 2020), developing strong relationships with people providing health care and offering access to health education (McCalman et al., 2020).

Supporting Aspirations

The final theme that emerged from the literature important to boarding schools was supporting aspirations. First Nations students and their families enrolled in boarding school for the opportunities and aspirations it provided, yet many First Nations students from remote communities faced significant challenges when they dropped out or were not supported with post-secondary school transitions.

Acknowledging student and family aspirations was important where staff are charged with realising these aspirations. The research suggests that parents send their children to boarding school thinking it was a safe environment that provided children with a more worldly education, knowledge of other cultures, access to tertiary education and opportunities for positive social mobility (Mander, 2015). For students, boarding school provided opportunities to finish Year 12, gain employment, make ‘something good out of life’ (Macdonald et al., 2018, p.199), play competitive sport, go to university and build a career (Pertl & Guerin, 2018). It was also thought to allow students to become more educated so that they could return to their home community, empower others, and help build a better future (Mander et al., 2015b). However, extending the care for students returning to their home community after boarding school has been a challenge. In a study by Rogers (2107), a student stated s/he is unlikely to return to his/her community because of drug, alcohol, and employment issues. Findings by O’Bryan & Fogarty (2020) reported that one community member explained the challenges First Nations graduates faced when trying to integrate back into a community where there was nothing to do and limited jobs. Dropout rates were reported as high as 59% in the first year of boarding school and 74% by the end of the second year (O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). There were cases where students who left boarding school had difficulty integrating back into their home community, often feeling unsupported. In one study, a student reflected on their own experience and explained that when a First Nations student dropped out of boarding school, they wouldn’t be let back into their home and may have had to live on the street (Pertl & Guerin, 2018). Further to this, a principal highlighted that despite the best efforts of the school to maintain contact with graduate students and offer mentoring, often graduates reverted to their old lives, were unemployed and caught up in the wrong crowds (Macdonald et al., 2018). Therefore, despite both parents and students hoping that boarding

school would provide opportunities and meet their aspirations, the reality was that for many the issues associated with retention and integrating back into home communities were significant.

Discussion

The Culturally Responsive Boarding framework can be a useful tool to inform policy and guide schools and teachers towards the enactment of quality practice in support of First Nations boarding students beyond the classroom. By considering the role that boarding schools occupy in the structures and arrangements of the settler colonial state, boarding staff could play an important role in building sociocultural consciousness. Boarding staff work at the interface of valuing Indigenous worldviews and understanding societal inequalities, systemic discrimination in schools and the ‘choice-less-choice’ many students face. It was clear from the findings that the boarding experience for First Nations students, their families and community, as well as the boarding staff and schools was incredibly complex and contextual. Weaving First Nations students’ ownership of the boarding school space and routines gives an agency over the mainstream school environment so they can feel a sense of belonging and cultural respect is normalised in the boarding house. The Culturally Responsive Boarding framework could be used to facilitate this ownership and to provide staff with the tools to support the balance between flexibility and structure. A flexible approach is recommended (Guerin and Pertl 2017; Macdonald et al. 2018) and may support students in negotiating the contrasting rules and expectations. Structures could also be built to support long absences from school as well as provide the cultural safety for when students stay at school and miss significant cultural events. By not providing the support required, schools are arguably setting these students up to fail.

A focus on staff learning about the students’ background and communities in Culturally Responsive Boarding enable the development of respectful relationships between staff and students. This could be done through communication with the First Nations students, their family, community and previous schools (Benveniste et al., 2019; Guerin and Pertl 2017). However, without structural reforms in boarding schools, teachers may feel powerless to effectively support First Nations students. Staff are charged with ensuring students learn mainstream knowledge and societal norms. Lowe et al., (2021) argue that Indigenous students are found lacking when their individualisation of student achievement of the White performance benchmarks are mapped against the broader student population. Boarding staff who show a positive interest in First Nations students’ culture are seeking out connections between culture and discipline curriculum learning. Boarding schools should support staff with cultural professional development (Bobongie 2017a; Guerin and Pertl 2017; Mander et al., 2015a) as well as training in health and wellbeing (Macdonald et al., 2018; McCalman et al. 2020). Ensuring sufficient resources are allocated to staff training and student health and wellbeing is critical if schools are to continue enrolling First Nations students. Student aspirations can be challenged when success is limited due to the broader structural inequalities in education. By focusing on student aspirations, staff in the boarding house can engage in an ontological dimension of Culturally Responsive Boarding, that includes providing a continuity of high expectations of student engagement in education outside of the classroom. The Culturally Responsive Boarding framework would highlight the importance of supporting the short-term goals of each student as steppingstones towards their future aspirations.

Like Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Boarding also has limitations, including the impact it can have on the structures that situate the practice of care and pedagogy. In an analysis of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy’s limitations, Martin et al., (2017) argue that a culturally responsive teacher can only have limited impact while there is still work to be done to “*decolonize the structures, knowledge systems, and institutional processes that support the status quo*” (p.248). Recent research framing by Weuffen et al., (2022) highlights how the Australian schools subscribe to colonial hospitality, where Indigenous students are penalised from entry and

then expected to conform to the colonial way of learning if they are to succeed. Although First Nations students are 'invited' to attend boarding schools, the results of this review suggest their culture is often not recognised in a context where it is vital to do so, particularly for the well-being and care necessary for retaining students. A limitation of Culturally Responsive Boarding is that the teachers and staff may not be able to enact lasting change on a boarding system that was originally designed to silence First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. While this non-ideal and unjust arrangement is a reality for many First Nations students facing secondary education, the proposed framework of Culturally Responsive Boarding may play a role in reforming boarding schools.

Conclusion

It was clear from the findings that the boarding experience for First Nations students, their families and community, as well as the boarding staff, is incredibly complex and contextual. For the most part, the evidence suggests that First Nations student experiences were negative and the antithesis of Culturally Responsive Boarding, ultimately demonstrating what doesn't work, rather than what works. Where First Nations students are exposed to negative experiences in boarding, retention rates are likely to be low. We acknowledge that negative experiences are not reported in all studies reflecting the complexity of boarding in Australia. The framework of Culturally Responsive Boarding is proposed in a time when there is limited accountability for funds provided to boarding scholarship organisations.

The proposed framework of Culturally Responsive Boarding may support teachers and staff to notice how they make judgements in their professional practice. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy was conceived to address the cultural inequalities in education, challenging the colonialism embedded in Western education and valuing the cultural diversity each student brings to the school (Taylor & Sobel, 2011). A Culturally Responsive Boarding framework contextualises the student experience and aims to care for and value the whole student. This is particularly important especially when care is extended beyond the classroom, away from home, and in a boarding context. This includes the students 'academic, psychological, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing' (Taylor & Sobel, 2011, p.10). Like Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Boarding can be used to understand the inequalities in education, but the proposed framework extends Culturally Responsive Pedagogy so staff can be culturally responsive as they provide care to First Nations boarding students. After being adopted and with a program of evaluation, Culturally Responsive Boarding could be a steppingstone to make boarding a better place to support First Nations students and their families.

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Remote School Retention in Australia: Why do First Nations Students Disengage and Drop out?

John Guenther

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

John.guenther@batchelor.edu.au

Rhonda Oliver

Curtin University

Rhonda.Oliver@curtin.edu.au

Robyn Ober

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

robyn.ober@batchelor.edu.au

Catherine Holmes

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

catherine.holmes@batchelor.edu.au

Abstract

The Australian education system works well for most students. However, equitable access to secondary education is problematic for First Nations people living in remote communities. There is a strong emphasis on Year 12 completion as an indicator of successful engagement in remote First Nations education. This has been partly driven by Australian Government ‘Closing the Gap’ targets. Yet for remote students Year 12 Certificate attainment is trending down, from 113 in 2013 down to 82 in 2022. Nationally, the target to achieve 96% Year 12 or equivalent is not on track for achievement.

This article explores what students, school staff and community members say leads to disengagement and dropout. It is based on research conducted in Western Australia and the Northern Territory during 2023 by a team of researchers from Batchelor Institute, Curtin University and University of Notre Dame. The research focused on remote and very remote Independent and Catholic schools. It engaged 229 in surveys and 136 in yarns or interviews. Most of the respondents were First Nations people.

Keywords: *remote education, First Nations education, disengagement, retention, attainment*

Introduction

Completing Year 12 is seen as a critical indicator of how young people are achieving their “full learning potential” (Productivity Commission, 2024, p. 45). Year 12 attainment is also seen as an important stepping stone towards engagement in the workforce, and as getting post-school qualifications. And yet despite good intentions of 16 years of ‘Closing the Gap’ efforts, targets for closing this gap for First Nations students are not on track to be reached. Nowhere is this more evident than in very remote communities where Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates for 20-24 year olds are about 40%, well short of the 96% Closing the Gap target (Productivity Commission, 2023, p. 52).

One of the key reasons for high school non-completion is the limited access to senior secondary education in remote communities. Of 173 very remote schools with greater than 80% First Nations enrolments, 27 offer schooling up to Year 6, another 28 offer schooling to Year 9, 36 offer school to Year 11, and 82 offer up to Year 12 in 2023 (see Table 1 in the Appendix 1). Even taking these data into account, the rate of non-completion of those who do have access to Year 12 remains

high. Based on analyses of My School and Census data, we estimate that from a pool of approximately 1350 very remote 17-year-old First Nations people, 1061 do not complete in a given year. That is 78% of potential completers, drop out (see Table 2 in Appendix 2).

The research which forms the basis of this article was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education through its *Emerging Priorities Program*. It follows concerns about declining attendance rates in remote First Nations communities. The research team sought to find out what affects, and what could be done to improve, student attendance, engagement and retention, in remote communities. Detailed findings can be viewed in the reports for the project (Guenther, Oliver et al., 2023). Flowing from this work this article provides answers to the question: Why do so many young Aboriginal people from remote communities drop out of school and not complete Year 12? We note that there is a risk that by asking this question, we are inadvertently shifting responsibility away from systems that should be supporting students, to the students themselves. In another article, we consider what contributes to young people's engagement and retention (Guenther et al., 2024). Nevertheless, we do not discount the agency of young people, or their experiences of and responses to, schooling they receive.

Noncompletion, Dropout and Dis/engagement

With respect to completions, we use the definition offered by My School

Senior secondary outcomes reflect the following key areas of student achievement:

awarding of senior secondary certificate of education

completion of senior secondary school. (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, 2024)

Attaining a Year 12 certificate means that a student has achieved a prescribed standard, however completion of senior secondary school does not necessarily mean that the standard has been met. Furthermore, dropout (i.e., no longer attending school) can occur at any point in a learning journey. Dropping out of school is ultimately a consequence of disengagement.

There is considerable literature from the past decade highlighting many reasons why students disengage and drop out from school, assuming that there is a school offering senior secondary learning in their community. The literature reviewed here draws from Australian research, and can include references to urban, regional and remote areas from all jurisdictions.

Non-attendance may be a symptom of disengagement but is probably not a reason for disengagement. Instead, reasons may include students' low levels of 'self-efficacy' (perception of their ability to do well at school) or 'self-concept' (Anderson et al., 2019; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010). This in turn may be related to feelings of 'wellbeing' (Tomyn et al., 2015). However, these individual level factors do not necessarily explain why students drop out in remote communities. Walker (2019) for example, found factors related to family or community life, and relational issues with peers, along with aspirational factors, that contributed to disengagement. Our brief review of literature canvases five key reasons related to cultural priorities, shame and trauma, mental health and wellbeing, teasing and bullying, and learning challenges. Beyond these there are many other reasons why students disengage, including access limitations, punitive policies and programs, the choice-less choice of going to boarding schools (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Mander, 2012), along with funding and resourcing.

Shame, Stigma and Trauma

O'Bryan (2021) identifies antecedent trauma as a barrier to engagement for students attending boarding schools and highlights how the colonial history of Australia continues to resonate into current generations (p.299). Similarly, Guenther et al. (2016) argue that First Nations students in boarding schools are unlikely to continue in the environment due to the "*frustration and shame of*

not coping in the new environment (which leads) to behavioural problems” (p.7). Oliver and Exell (2020) explain how First Nations students report feelings of shame, and experience racism when speaking Standard Australian English and Indigenous language varieties. This is exacerbated by the general lack of awareness exhibited by teachers in terms of First Nation students’ language backgrounds (e.g. Oliver et al., 2011). The findings of their research suggest educational settings should support multilingual First Nations students and their families. A three-year study by Harrison, Burke, and Clarke (2023) on the impacts of teaching about the experiences of trauma on students studying to become teachers recommends the need of a trauma-informed pedagogy in schools. Houshmand et al. (2019) correlate trauma and strategic responses to racial microaggressions, which often occur in educational settings (Moodie et al., 2019). Chenhall et al. (2011) portray the “*stigma of underachievement*” for remote students, that “*sees them proactively avoiding school altogether*” (p. 45).

Student Learning Challenges

The reasons for the feelings of underachievement arise from several factors, which are related to pedagogy, curriculum, resourcing, and assessment methods. In terms of assessment, many researchers have challenged the validity of NAPLAN tests (literacy and numeracy assessments at national level) as a way of gauging students’ academic achievement (e.g., Hardy, 2013; Wigglesworth et al., 2011), partly because the tests do not reflect the realities of culture, language and Country (Angelo, 2013; Freeman, 2013; Freeman & Wigglesworth, 2020). Resourcing—more specifically under-resourcing—has a profound impact on schools and their ability to provide enough staff to meet the individual learning needs of students, and so it is not surprising that “*increases in student to teacher ratio [are] associated with decreases in school average NAPLAN scores*” (Coleman, 2018, p. 44). The absence of local teachers and support staff can also profoundly impact engagement (Guenther, 2016). The relevance of teaching to the Australian curriculum in remote schools is also seen as a reason for disengagement and a source of dissatisfaction with schooling (Harrison, Tennent et al., 2023). Conversely, incorporating local knowledge into curriculum and teaching is recognised as a positive influence for student engagement in learning (Disbray & Martin, 2017; Osborne et al., 2013). And beyond curriculum, the practice of teaching and learning often makes false assumptions about what good pedagogy is for remote learners (Osborne, 2023). Of course, all the negative influences described above can be turned around with intentional effort and adequate resourcing.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Concerns

Osborne (2013) highlights the need for a shared understanding of what ‘mental health’ means in remote community schools. Dudgeon et al. (2014) describe how First Nations people prefer to take a holistic view of mental health (p. xxv)—one that includes social and emotional wellbeing. It is also a view that encompasses the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community and how these affect the individual (p. 548). Milgate and Giles-Brown’s (2013) research with a group First Nations students, parents and carers reveal that health and wellbeing is one of the six key themes of an effective school for First Nations children and, in fact, for the whole school community. In this instance, health and wellbeing include “*strategies to support students, aspirations and career development, behaviour, feeling safe and happy, sense of acceptance and belonging, cultural pride and identity, self-confidence and transitions*” (p. 5). The parents and carers of the group indicated that student support was the most important factor whereas, the students stated that racism was the most important factor in relation to their health and wellbeing. This is an important finding as it forms the basis of research by Priest et al. (2013). They review 121 global studies where racial discrimination is significant in the data. They argue the “*complex role that racial discrimination plays as a determinant of child and youth health*” (p. 115) and the need for further investigations into the effects on child and youth health in Australia.

Cultural Priorities

Another significant factor contributing to the barriers to remote children and families attending, engaging and retaining in school programs is the cultural mismatch of home and school environments. Krakouer (2016) proposes that culturally aligned early years programs can have a positive impact in creating a smoother transition from home to school. Lowe et al.'s (2021) systematic review of cultural programs in schools pointed out the cultural discrepancy between the school and community and calls for greater resourcing, easier access and improved leadership. Miller and Berger (2022) argue:

The school environment often had a different value system to that of Aboriginal communities. These differences created barriers for school staff to work collaboratively with parents and families to support First Nations students. Teachers identified that when culturally relevant practices and procedures were put in place, First Nations parents and families were more likely to engage with the school (p. 493).

Anderson et al. (2022) suggest there is a lack of pedagogical readiness for First Nations students in schools which leads to a dissonance in aspirations and priorities between home and school. At times, that dissonance results in a non-negotiable default to participate in cultural ceremonies and funerals, which inevitably result in a problem for schools, described as 'mobility' (Doyle & Prout, 2012; Taylor, 2012), and a deficit for First Nations people (McCallum & Waller, 2020). While attending a funeral might be seen as disruptive for schools and students, they are seen as essential for families. Benveniste et al. (2022) comment:

While it may be tempting to suggest that students should avoid coming home mid-term, not being able to attend funerals or other cultural events also deprives students of access to important sources of psychological wellbeing and protective factors, such as connection to land, family, culture and spiritual identity. (p.6)

There is little doubt that managing cultural obligations can be unsettling for young people, particularly those studying away from community in boarding settings, and can 'exacerbate feelings of homesickness' (Benveniste et al., 2022, p. 6), which in turn may affect school engagement and retention. However, maintaining cultural obligations ensures that young people remain connected to their community, family, language, Country and culture. This connection is fundamentally important for many remote families.

Teasing, Bullying and Violence

Guenther et al. (2018), in a case study of a school in central Australia, find that teasing plays a significant role in disrupting safety at school, and this leads to disengagement. They highlight that teasing ranges from non-verbal cues to extreme physical violence and resulted in parents withholding children from school (see also Niddrie et al. (2018)). They also conclude that teasing starts outside the school gate (see also Coffin et al. (2010)) but fixing teasing would not necessarily solve the attendance problem. Coffin (2011) also notes the intra-racial prevalence of bullying in schools, and the connection this had to challenges about children's Aboriginal identity. More generally, the connection between bullying and engagement and retention is difficult to clearly define and it may be that factors associated with attendance and academic performance lead to bullying (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). Nevertheless, schools are required to provide safe working and learning environments for staff and students. A safe school environment is of course far more attractive to students than an unsafe one.

While there are other factors reported in the literature on the topic of retention, engagement and attendance, those discussed above are among the strongest themes which arise from the literature. The findings discussed in this article allow us to test whether there is general support for these factors, from a sample of school staff, community members and students in remote communities of Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

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 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.

Methodological Foundations: Indigenist Perspectives

The oral tradition of storytelling, known as yarning (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2010; Ober, 2017) is a feature of Indigenous social engagement. 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 this conversational interview process, prioritizing 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.

The role of the community-based researchers was critical to implementing the research plan in the selected remote communities of Northern Territory and Western Australia. They were involved in various activities including interview schedule design and data collection. Eleven senior students from Wongatha Christian Aboriginal Parent Directed (CAPS) School in Western Australia were also involved as co-researchers, conducting interviews with community and family members.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this project:

1. What has impacted student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools in Northern Territory and Western Australia (including COVID-19 and other events)?
2. 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 focus of this article is one of the reasons for disengagement and dropout in remote schools (Research Question 1), though it is often difficult to disentangle concepts of attendance, retention, engagement, transition and attainment. Reasons for engagement and retention, along with a response to Research Question 2 can be found in the final report for the research project (Guenther, Oliver et al., 2023).

Sample and Instruments

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. Rich data descriptions resulted from the longer yarning sessions that occurred at four case study sites (Nawarddeken Academy, Yiyili Aboriginal Community School (Thorburn & Ridley 2024), Yipirinya School (Holmes et al., 2023) and Wongatha CAPS School (Oliver et al., 2023). All reports from the project can be downloaded from <https://www.remoteschoolengagement.au/final-reports>.

Online Qualtrics surveys were completed by 226 respondents including 26 students, 63 community members and 137 school staff. All students and community members identified as

First Nations people, as were about half of the school staff and leaders. We asked the same questions of each group in the survey so we could compare the results.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed and summarised using Qualtrics inbuilt statistical analysis tools, including preparation of cross-tabs and summary tables for each question. Additional analysis was conducted using exported data into Microsoft Excel, for the purposes of comparison of the three separate survey results.

Yarning and interview data were transcribed and added to an NVivo database for thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Ethics

Ethical Approval was granted by the Northern Territory Menzies School of Health Research Human Research Ethics Committee, and the Human Research Ethics Committees from University of Notre Dame (Australia), and Curtin University. Ethics clearance was granted from Australian Independent Schools (Western Australia), Australian Independent Schools (Northern Territory) and Catholic Education in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia. We applied for but were not granted approval to work in government schools in both jurisdictions.

Limitations of This Research

We acknowledge several limitations with our methodology and the findings. The biggest group of very remote schools in Western Australia and the Northern Territory are government schools. As we did not have access to these schools, the specific concerns relating to public education are not addressed here.

An online survey is not necessarily the best way to gather information from remote community members, partly because of internet access issues and partly because the idea of an individualised survey may be unfamiliar. Further, the survey constrained people's responses to the 13 questions, though we did give the opportunity for respondents to put their additional comments in a text box.

Most of the respondents we spoke to were in some way associated with schools, either as staff, parents of students, students or Elders and community members with an interest in education. While we have no reason to doubt the validity of their responses, it is possible that people who were not so well connected to a school, could have different opinions.

Finally, when we yarned with people, the distinctions between attendance, engagement and retention were not necessarily clear in the minds of respondents. While in our data analysis, we tried our best to separate responses into these categories, in many cases, the discussions merged the concepts together.

Findings

In the sections that follow, we present findings from the survey which was conducted with 229 participants across Western Australia and the Northern Territory. We then examine the yarning dataset to see what it tells us about the top five ranked reasons.

Survey Results: Reasons for Dropout and Disengagement

Figure 1 summarises the reasons for dropping out, sorted in community-member respondents' order of priority. The most frequently reported reason for community members was 'teasing and bullying' (n=24); for school staff it was 'cultural reasons or priorities', (n=55) and for students it was 'shame' (n=8). Mental health and wellbeing also figured strongly in the reasons, as did a belief that 'students feel like they can't keep up'. We noted earlier that systemic and institutional

issues are important to consider. Our survey instrument did try to capture some of these issues (for example teaching styles, racism and discrimination, financial difficulties, problems with teachers and the principal). However, the main responses to questions of disengagement and dropout focus on how students respond or react, rather than what schools are/not doing to support them.

Figure 1: Reasons why Students Stop Going to School/Drop out (n=229)

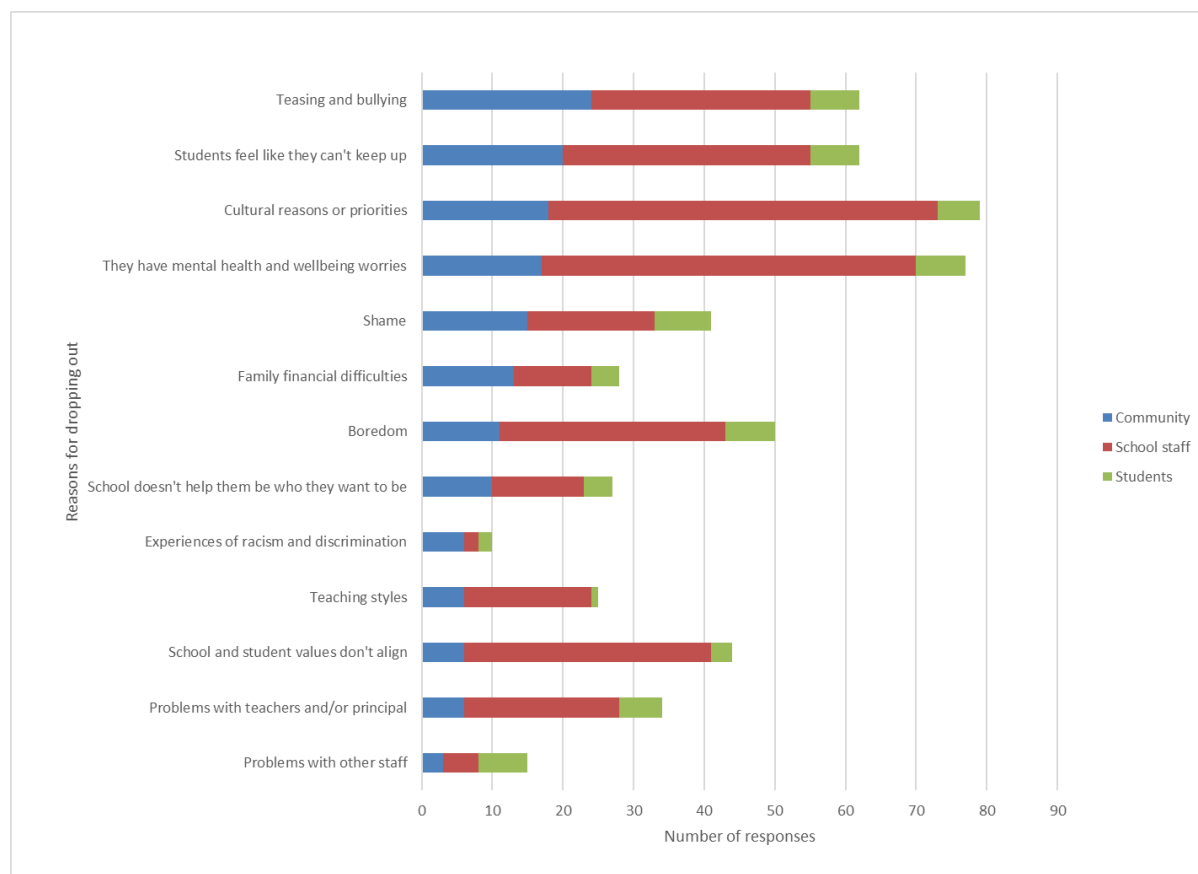
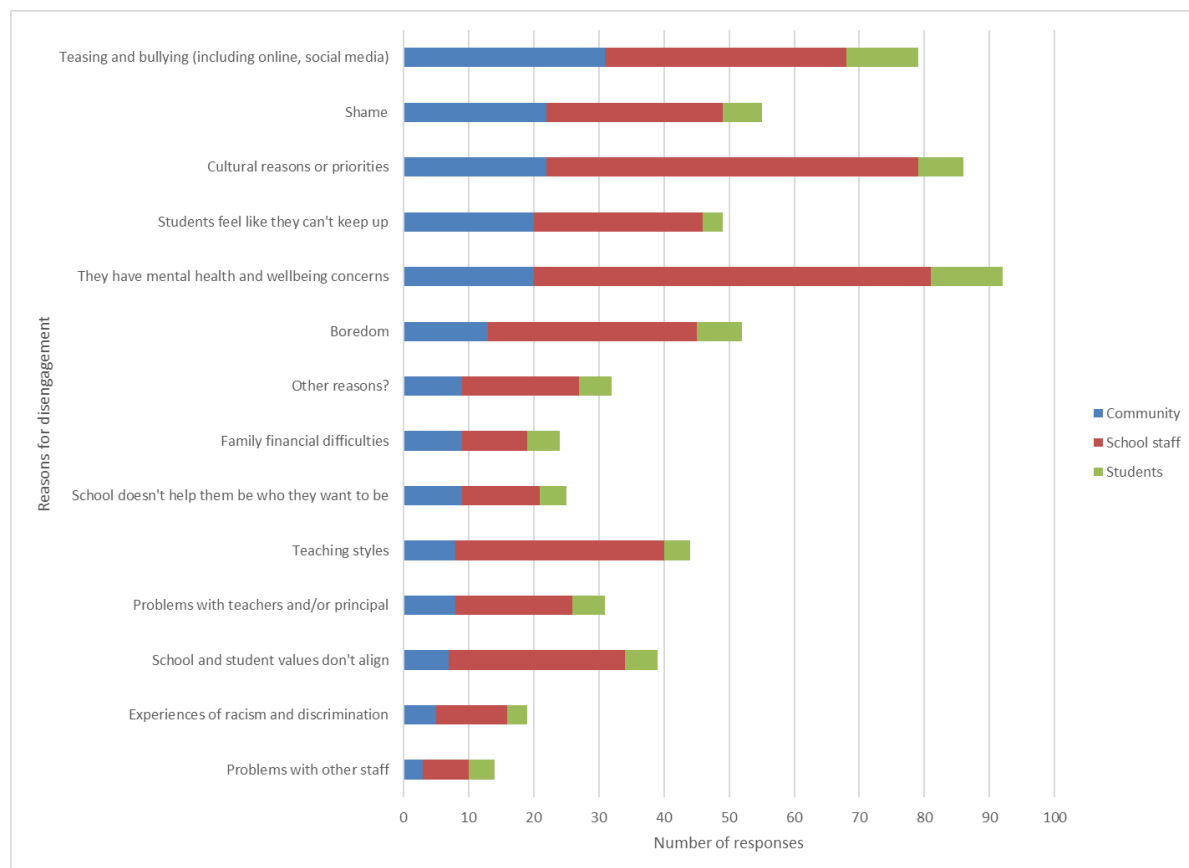


Figure 2 summarises the reasons for disengaging, sorted in community-member respondents' order of priority. Community members again nominated 'teasing and bullying' (n=31) as the main reason, while staff felt that 'mental health and wellbeing' (n=61) was the main reason. Students saw both these issues equally (n=11) as the main reason for disengagement. The other reasons for disengagement were 'shame', 'not keeping up' and 'cultural reasons or priorities'.

Figure 2: Reasons why Students Don't Attend Every day/Disengage (n=229)



Findings From Yarns and Interviews

The figures above highlight other concerns raised by respondents related to ‘boredom’, ‘teaching styles’, ‘school values’ and ‘racism or discrimination’. However, for this article, we concentrate on the top five issues identified by community members, which as we noted earlier, are very much focused on young people’s responses to issues of disengagement and dropout.

Teasing, Bullying, Fighting and Conflict. While the survey identified ‘teasing and bullying’ as an issue, the discussion in the yarns turned also to fighting and conflicts as a reason for both disengagement and drop out. Respondents were candid about where they saw points of disengagement. Teasing and bullying were described variously as ‘jealousing’, staring, and fighting

Q: Is there much bullying issues at the school, like teasing and stuff?

R1: No.

R2: Sometimes it will happen like for fights but mainly that’s all the girls. They’re jealous of each other for their boyfriend.

R1: We all stay in the same dorms and stuff.

R2: Sometimes it’s the year 12 girls jealousing of the year 11 and 10 girls.

Q: Oh wow, what for?

R1: Boyfriend.

Q: Because they’re looking at them?

R2: Staring.

Q: *Talking to them?*

R2: *I say staring is the main one I think. (Students, Western Australia)*

Some respondents commented on how family conflicts sometimes resulted in children staying away from school.

When I first came here, I picked up on it straight away. If there was family fighting, all of a sudden there wouldn't be as many kids. Then when the families came back together, at the school, there was just so much involvement. (Non-local teacher, Western Australia)

Asked why children stay away from school, some respondents commented on fighting and arguments:

R1: *Fighting, teasing each other.*

R2: *Fighting.*

R1: *Sometimes the one person gets it and the other one wants it so they kind of argue. (Local teachers, Northern Territory)*

Another commented on problems arising when people from neighbouring communities come to stay:

Other young people when they come from other outstations, there's a lot of fighting going on. (Local teacher, Northern Territory)

Some of our respondents spoke of harrowing experiences of gangs coming into the community, fighting and threatening families. This had an immediate impact on engagement at school as the school had to close from time to time to ensure that everyone was safe.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing, Trauma, Health and Mental Health. When respondents discussed issues related to health and wellbeing, they described a complex set of experiences and circumstances that did not neatly fit into a discrete category. For example, one local staff member described 'family issues' as a reason for disengagement, but around that were issues of teasing, food security, funerals, ceremony, money management and alcohol or drugs.

Parents... Not looking after their kids proper way, misuse their money, teasing at school. Main reason is some kids don't want to come to school, yes, because of family issues. Funerals, ceremony, they don't see family bring their food at home when they go to the shop, they spent on grog and buying gunja. (Local staff, Northern Territory)

Another respondent from Western Australia, when asked about disengagement, mentioned substance misuse, family violence, criminal activity, and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) in one sentence.

I think there's a lot of stuff going on in the community that's really impacting kids and a lot of elders and not even elders, just parents are really concerned about the social breakdown in communities which a lot of people say is worse than it's ever been. Substance misuse, family violence, criminal activity of the kids, the FASD is through the roof. (Principal, Western Australia)

Another principal spoke also about domestic violence and the consequences for complex trauma in children.

The domestic violence rates in the [region] are some of the highest in Australia and that has been increasing as well, so the amount of children that we're getting through that are getting diagnosed with complex trauma is huge. (Principal, Northern Territory)

Even with the best facilities and school set up to cater for vocational pathways, and with strong leadership and buy in from communities, schools may still find it difficult to retain students. To some degree this is because of social and emotional wellbeing concerns.

It is about retention for us – it is the key and the challenge... Students go home because of the cold, because of social/well-being and family issues... Some find it difficult to be ‘off country’ and away from family. (Boarding school principal, Western Australia)

Learning Challenges and Shame. The concerns raised in the survey about students feeling that ‘they can’t keep up’ was linked to ‘shame’ in some of our yarns. We therefore combine these two issues in our presentation of interview findings. One teacher felt that students might think:

I’m not going to feel the shame and embarrassment of not knowing or being put on the spot. (non-local Teacher, Northern Territory)

A principal explained how shame and learning challenges are linked. From their response, the sense of shame is related to confidence, or feeling safe in an environment where the student does not understand what is going on:

A lot of the struggles that I think bigger schools have [such as] kids coming from other clans, other kids looking at them, [with] you know, the big eye and that shame of perhaps not being able to engage at that level; that shame of “we’re all learning about Pythagoras’ theorem and how do we implement that?” And the shame of “I really don’t know what’s going on here”, versus not only the curriculum but also if there is a problem and someone is looking at you funny and there’s a blow-up, we deal with it in five minutes. (Principal, Northern Territory)

Students saw shame as linked to their classroom experiences. When asked what turns young people off going to school some students offered this list:

Don’t like reading in front of everyone

SHAME

Bullies

They just don’t like it

Boarding school, being away from home/country, homesick

Teachers pepper them with questions too much

Teachers use big words

Distracted by family members both at school and by family calling from home

Students running each other down, rumours, gossip

Not enough sleep

Work is too hard or boring

Relationship problems, like young kids get shamed to go to school coz they think they are gonna see that girl/boy (Students, Western Australia)

Other students talked about “being married up” (i.e., being in a relationship) as a reason for not going to school. Others described getting caught in the system: “Young people get stuck in the system and don’t [go to] school—police, DCP [Child Protection], juvenile justice”.

‘Shame’ was associated with other factors related to ‘boy/girl’ relationships, not understanding ‘big words’ that teachers use, rumours or gossip. In another quote in response to a question from a student, the ‘turn off’ is connected to the ‘shame’ of not understanding, but it is also linked to bullying from other students, and what is happening at home:

Maybe they don't understand some of the questions and they don't know how to answer them so they get shame and they, I don't know, yeah, probably that. Maybe other kids picking on them, maybe they're getting abuse and whatever from home so there's a lot of things that could be going wrong. (Community member, Western Australia)

Funerals, Ceremony and Cultural Obligations. Funerals or 'sorry business' were cited as reasons for 'low attendance' and temporary school closures.

If there's funerals in [nearby community] and when they have the funeral, they decide that they want to stay there for how many weeks they want to stay there, then their attendance can go low. (Student, Northern Territory)

The impact of funerals varies from community to community, but it is evident that frequent deaths do affect how many staff and students are at school.

And funerals affect people differently, so [another community], because it's so small, the community closes, funeral, closes, whereas here we don't do that, it just impacts staff numbers and student numbers. (Principal, Northern Territory)

Some respondents alluded to the mobility associated with attending funerals. One principal suggested that sometimes student numbers increase as a result of funerals:

It takes more people away so families will go off and they might go off to a funeral in one of the other communities nearby and then there's another funeral, so they move off to that one and it becomes a cycle of attending. People can be gone for weeks around those things. 'Sorry camps' can consume people but sometimes it brings students to us, sometimes it takes students away. (Principal, Northern Territory)

Community members also identified funerals as a reason for dropping out. Asked by a student, why their family member had left school, the respondent stated:

The reason why I left school was back when I was schooling down at the [School], there was an incident with my grandmother passing away and I had to go back home to the Kimberley. I went back home there and that was it. (Community member, Western Australia)

Another community member described how he chose to participate in Ceremonies, even though he wanted to learn the "western side of schooling":

Ceremony. I wanted to go to school to learn more western side of schooling, anyway, and then, I went for the first one, the second one, I was attending all the Ceremonies by the time when I finished all the Ceremonies, it was too late. I was already 17. (Community member, Northern Territory)

Complexity and Interwoven Nature of Issues

We have described just five of the factors that respondents to the research identified as contributing to disengagement and dropout. The factors identified by our respondents align quite closely to the more general Australian literature. However, the examples they give, and the language they use, are discussed within a cultural context that may be markedly different from non-remote areas.

Why do Young People Disengage and Drop out of School?

We note that disengagement and non-attendance are associated with drop-out. That is evident from the similar responses to both issues in the survey (Figure 1 and Figure 2). As previous research has shown, drop-out is more likely when attendance drops below 60% (Dadi et al., 2023). There are some individual factors that contribute to drop out and disengagement such as shame, mental health and wellbeing concerns, and feelings of not keeping up—some of which might be

related to self-efficacy or self-concept as noted earlier (Anderson et al., 2019; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2010), but it is likely that individual factors are also connected to relational and institutional factors. For example, ‘shame’ could result from pedagogical/curriculum challenges that mean that students feel like they are behind, but shame could also be linked to teasing and bullying, which may include lateral violence (Coffin, 2011; Coffin et al., 2010). Cultural priorities, which result in family mobility add to the difficulties faced by school, though it should be noted that mobility is not necessarily seen as problem for students and families. Young people exercise choices which align to their values and their community’s expectations, and this inevitably means that many choose not to continue at school in favour of other options such as getting ‘married up’. Beyond these choices, some young people described getting caught in non-school institutional traps, such as the juvenile justice system.

What becomes apparent, on reading through the comments, is that there is no single reason for disengagement and drop out. Further, even when a range of support factors and attendance motivators are put in place, there is no guarantee that students will remain engaged and complete Year 12. In our field visits we saw and heard about many good examples of school communities going above and beyond what might be reasonably expected of them—including strong local school governance, breakfast programs, learning on Country, on-Country boarding programs, supportive and proactive vocational programs, strong local employment, and community engagement initiatives—and yet most struggled with consistent engagement, and those that were offering Year 12, struggled to keep them there.

Access Remains an Issue for Many Remote Communities

Aside from the factors identified in the surveys and supported by the yarning/interview data, access to secondary education in remote communities remains limited, with less than half of all very remote communities having reasonable local access to Year 12. Boarding schools may be a solution for some communities or individual students, but they create another set of problems for young people, and it is likely that they accelerate disengagement (Dadi et al., 2023). Interestingly, our respondents rarely discussed ‘access’ as an issue, quite possibly because (as noted in the Limitations) they had successfully navigated access options that they were comfortable with. The other point to note here is that there may be an expectation among many remote community members that limited access is a ‘given’. Nevertheless, with less than half of all very remote schools offering a locally based pathway to Year 12 (as shown in Table 1), this is still an important equity and justice issue that should not be dismissed (Guenther, Fuqua et al., 2023). It may also be worth noting that after years of pursuing boarding as the main option for secondary provision following the Wilson Review (Wilson, 2014), the Northern Territory Government’s latest review of secondary education recognises the need to provide more locally based secondary education options (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023).

What can or Should be Done to Ameliorate the Challenges?

While the intent of this article is to highlight why disengagement and dropout occur in very remote First Nations community schools, the reasons we have presented here do beg the question of what should be done. How can schools create environments that are culturally and physically safe for students? How can (or should) schools influence the agentic decisions of young people to engage in learning at school and stay to complete year 12 (when that option is available to them)? How can schools and systems work together to meet not just the education needs of young people, but also the social and emotional needs related to traumatic experiences? The answer to each of these questions demands a serious response and should not be dismissed as issues that are out of schools’ control, as Wilson (2014) did in his Northern Territory Indigenous Education Review when he stated: “*Schools and school systems cannot control these issues and should not be blamed when matters beyond their control limit their*

achievements.” (p. 14) This is hardly a just or equitable response to an issue that at its heart is a human rights issue.

Conclusions

There are many reasons for disengagement and Year 12 dropout of First Nations students from remote community schools. While the research presented here focuses on how students respond to these concerns, we cannot ignore the access issues that remote students face—with less than half of all very remote schools offering an accessible pathway to Year 12 completion. Equally, we cannot ignore the experiences of students and dismiss them as beyond our control. Those experiences include trauma, stigma and learning challenges associated with learning in a language environment which does not reflect local languages and cultural knowledge. Nor can we ignore the experiences of teasing, bullying and violence and the concomitant concerns about mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

Schools and systems can do better at working together with specialist services, with parents and community members to address those concerns. A response to the issues raised by respondents, requires an understanding of the complexities associated with learning in very remote communities. Change is possible, particularly where there is political will and resourcing available to address the many challenges that remote First Nations students, parents, schools and communities face.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the funding support from the Australian Government Department of Education through its Emerging Priorities Program, which enabled us to conduct the research.

We also acknowledge the work of the broader project team, particularly Catherine Ridley, Kathryn Thorburn, Helen CD McCarthy and Steph Dryden. Further, the rich data we obtained from communities would not have been possible without input from our team of community-based researchers.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Number of very remote schools with >80% First Nations students, by jurisdiction, 2023

Highest Year level offered in community*	Very Remote schools with >80% First Nations Students	Very Remote schools with up to 80% First Nations students
3	1	
5	1	
6	25	44
7	12	
8	2	
9	14	2
10	24	10
11	12	1
12	82	60
Total	173	117

Source: My School data for 2023, * The highest level of schooling to the community includes schools are within one-hour drive from the community, and therefore could be accessed via a bus/car commute.

Appendix 2

Table 2: First Nations Year 12 completers and non-completers in very remote schools

	2011	2016	2021
First Nations Year 12 completers counted on Census night (A)*	8119	10762	12238
Intercensal Growth of First Nations Year 12 completers (B)=A(y5)-A(y0)		2643	1476
First Nations 17 year olds counted on Census night (C) *	1	1349	1356
Annual intercensal growth of VR Year 12 completers (D) =B/5		529	295
Year 12 completers, First Nations students in very remote schools (average over 5 years) (E)**		230	261
Balance of average annual growth from boarding schools, migration or other sources (F)=D-E		299	34
Year 12 Non-completers (G)=C-D		820	1061
Proportion of 17 year olds who drop out		61%	78%

Sources: * ABS Census (Tablebuilder) place of usual residence, **My School, Estimate based on very remote schools, Year 12 completion numbers and proportion of First Nations students in schools with >80% First Nations enrolment and schools up to 80% First Nations enrolment.



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Meeting the Needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and the Needs of a System in Remote Western Australian Communities

Laura Moore

Department of Education, Western Australia
laura.moore2@education.wa.edu.au

Rachael Macfarlane

Department of Education, Western Australia
rachael.macfarlane@education.wa.edu.au

Nigel Wakefield

Department of Education, Western Australia
nigel.wakefield@education.wa.edu.au

Serena Davie

Department of Education, Western Australia
serena.davie@education.wa.edu.au

Abstract

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' attendance, retention and engagement in remote schools have been concerns for educators and successive governments. In many communities, students are encouraged to complete secondary education at boarding school, because of seemingly limited educational opportunities in their local communities. The vision of the Western Australian Department of Education's School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) is to provide learning opportunities for students, regardless of their circumstances, through high quality, inclusive and culturally responsive programs. Because vision statements are aspirational and need to be backed with strategies for implementation, SIDE established a Regional Teaching Team in 2024. The purpose of this team is to meet the unique needs of students in the Northern Goldfields and Kimberley regions which have a high representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Providing programs and pathways to meet the needs of Aboriginal students in these remote contexts is not possible without a deep understanding of the context and culture of the local communities, schools, and the students within them. The Regional Teaching Team works with local communities to deliver co-designed culturally responsive education.

Keywords: *remote schools, Aboriginal students, engagement, regional teaching, co-design, community consultation*

Introduction

Western Australia's School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) provides distance education for K–12 students who cannot attend school. In 2024, more than 4000 students were enrolled. SIDE students in regional, remote and metropolitan schools in Western Australia study using Webex and Moodle (online learning and communication platforms). They may also be travelling within Australia or overseas, or they might be elite athletes participating in sport or dance. In this paper, the focus is students in the Northern Goldfields, where schools with limited numbers of secondary teachers cannot offer a full secondary education. These schools choose SIDE to provide education for secondary students. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work for students in these schools. Low literacy and numeracy levels and irregular attendance suggest that student and community needs are not being met.

In 2023, SIDE received feedback from remote and regional schools that the programs were not culturally responsive. As a result, members of SIDE's leadership team visited a remote school on

the Mitchell Plateau, 2800 kilometres north of Perth, to discuss the education of students who were not engaged. Feedback from community Elders created a sense of urgency to do things differently. The SIDE leadership team decided to adopt an innovative approach to engaging Aboriginal students using a meaningful, culturally inclusive curriculum and prioritising relationships with students.

The team created a conceptual teaching and learning model (known as SIDE 3 Pillars) for students in the Northern Goldfields and Kimberley, and the Regional Teaching Team was created. The purpose of the SIDE 3 Pillars model was to enable a small team of teachers to develop strong local knowledge of contexts and develop effective relationships with students, teachers and local communities.

The Regional Teaching Team is a select group of teachers who are committed to a flexible co-designed pedagogy to meet the needs of students in remote communities in the Kimberley and Northern Goldfields. Teachers were required to apply for positions within the team. The challenges for the team include the requirement to travel extensively. To date in 2024, the Regional Teaching Team schools have received more than 300 days of SIDE teacher visits.

The SIDE 3 Pillars, which provide a framework for schools and communities to develop, are:

- Skills for Working in Community,
- Caring for Self and Community, and
- Culture and Community.

Skills for Working in Community is about providing students with practical, work-related skills that could lead to employment opportunities within their community. Caring for Self and Community is about providing students with the skills and knowledge to care for themselves and other members of their community. Culture and Community is about providing students with the knowledge to protect, preserve and promote their culture and country. Each pillar has clear objectives and associated qualifications or micro-credentials.

A key element of the SIDE 3 Pillars model was a co-designed teaching approach, to create culturally responsive learning opportunities that build on the knowledge, skills and prior experiences of students. The Department of Education's *Focus 2024* (Department of Education Western Australia, 2024) calls for the use of co-design approaches to establish partnerships between schools and their Aboriginal communities.

Student performance data were used to assist teachers with diagnosing student learning needs. In addition, vocational education and training teams were positioned to work with each school community, to build a pathway that reflected community aspirations for their students to stay On-Country or to enter broader opportunities in post-school training or employment.

Whilst in the early stages of implementation, feedback and uptake of the Regional Teaching Team model has been overwhelmingly positive. In the Goldfields and Kimberly regions, there are more than 300 students enrolled, with nine full-time staff allocated to the initiative. Student attendance and engagement has increased and feedback from co-teachers has been very positive, as shown by the quote from a SIDE supervising teacher in a remote Regional Teaching Team school:

This year SIDE set up the Regional Teaching Team and have provided us with four amazingly dedicated, responsive, skilled teachers who are all meeting the kids where they are at. They are all tailoring the content to be inherently interesting and relevant to our context, culture, language and community. The kids ARE interested! Not once have I had to coerce, convince or cajole anyone to log in and participate in the classes, or even to do the off-air work that comes through. This is vastly different to last year when I'd have to track students down and pull them in [to school] to login. Now they are asking ME when is it time to log in? The teachers are obviously also working together as much as they can, and many parts of our

schooling is now basically a Two-Way Learning approach. From my side of the computer, I really think it is working.

Northern Goldfields Context

The Northern Goldfields of Western Australia is a unique region, rich in natural resources and Aboriginal culture. Figure 1 shows a map of the region, which includes the small outback towns and communities of Leonora, Laverton, Wiluna, Menzies and Tjuntjuntjara. The schools have high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student populations, as shown in Table 1. In addition, the schools have Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage scores below average and between 58 and 100% of students have a language background that is not English.

Figure 1: Map of the Northern Goldfields

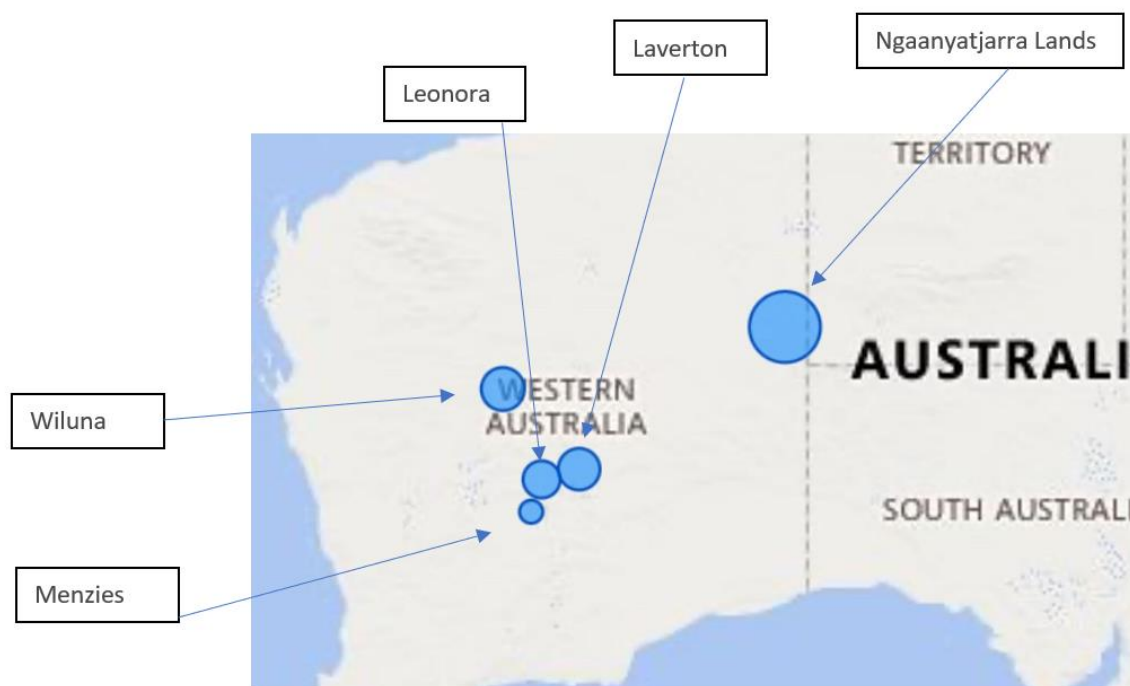


Table 1: Size of Community and School Populations

School	Community Population (Local Govt Area)	% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students	% Students with a Language Background other than English
Cosmo Newberry	62	100	100
Laverton	907	82	58
Leonora	1588	65	77
Menzies	103	91	95
Tjuntjuntjara	64	100	100
Wiluna	535	90	95

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2024)

Barriers to Learning

The main barriers to learning at school in the Northern Goldfields are irregular attendance, limited school support and student engagement.

Attendance

In 2023, secondary attendance across Western Australian public schools was 83%. The attendance rates in the Northern Goldfields schools were much lower: Laverton 66%, Leonora 64%, Wiluna 53%, Tjuntjuntjara 45% and Menzies 58%. The attendance of students in the Regional Teaching Team program will be tracked as one measure of its effectiveness.

School Support

Schools that enrol students at SIDE provide a SIDE supervisor to oversee students. A SIDE supervisor, who can create a welcoming SIDE learning space, co-teach with SIDE teachers and keep students on track, is vital to student success. Teaching staff and leadership turnover in regional schools, especially remote community schools, means that the SIDE supervisor is often changing and there can be a lack of consistency. A school may timetable many teachers to oversee the SIDE students. This can mean that there might be no teacher understanding or ownership of the SIDE learning space. This can be an issue, because the support of school leadership has a significant impact on the success of programs implemented in schools. Another barrier is a lack of local Aboriginal staff in schools, because they have the potential to bridge the cultural gap (Price et al., 2019).

In 2024, there were new SIDE supervisors in several Regional Teaching Team schools. Teachers were often new to Western Australia, new to remote contexts, and with limited experience of working with Aboriginal students. One of the schools was without a substantive principal for the first two terms of 2024. Without stable supportive leadership, the opportunities to implement changes are limited (Levin et al., 2020).

Disengagement

Disengagement among students in remote schools in Australia can stem from a variety of factors, including geographical isolation, limited resources, cultural differences, and socio-economic challenges. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that considers the specific circumstances of remote communities.

Breaking the Barriers

Barriers can be broken in different ways. These include developing relationships and engaging the community through co-designed programs.

Relationships

Relationships are developed through SIDE's online platforms Webex and Moodle and through regular face-to-face visits. Unique interim progress reports were designed to capture the strengths of the students and give them something to be proud of. Regional Teaching Team teachers worked across learning areas and embedded two-way contextual learning into their planning.

The regular use of positive commendations has an impact on student engagement. This is illustrated by an email received from the SIDE supervisor in Menzies, who provided "a quick recount of something that happened in our Year 7 Health lesson this afternoon":

Tim (not real name) had to write down two things that happened at school this week that made him feel good. This was his response: "I felt good when Miss Maree emailed me to say: 'Fantastic work.' I feel good when I talk to my teachers in a Webex."

Ladies, we have a win. Thank you so much for making those adjustments for him. Really appreciate it. The relationships between the Regional Teaching Team students and the Team are having a positive impact.

Community Engagement and Co-Designed Programs

The Regional Teaching Team seeks to work closely with community leaders, parents and local organisations, to build strong relationships and foster a supportive learning environment. Engaging the community in the education process can increase student motivation, attendance and involvement.

In Term 3, members of the Team attended a three-day On-Country two-way science professional learning workshop with the Martu Traditional Owners of Matuwa Kurrara Kurrara on the edge of the Gibson Desert in Western Australia. Such opportunities, with rich time spent together On-Country, builds mutual respect, understanding and knowledge. This enables teachers to acknowledge and build on their students' prior learning and design learning programs that are relevant and engaging.

Regional Teaching Team schools offer a range of engagement programs, as shown in Table 2. These have been designed to engage students in learning and to make learning relevant to their lives. The skills gained through these programs need to be acknowledged and mapped to student employment passports. SIDE plays a key role in identifying what students are doing in school and in their communities and mapping such skills so that they are recognised in their leaving employment passport.

Table 2: Engagement Programs Operating in the Regional Teaching Team Schools

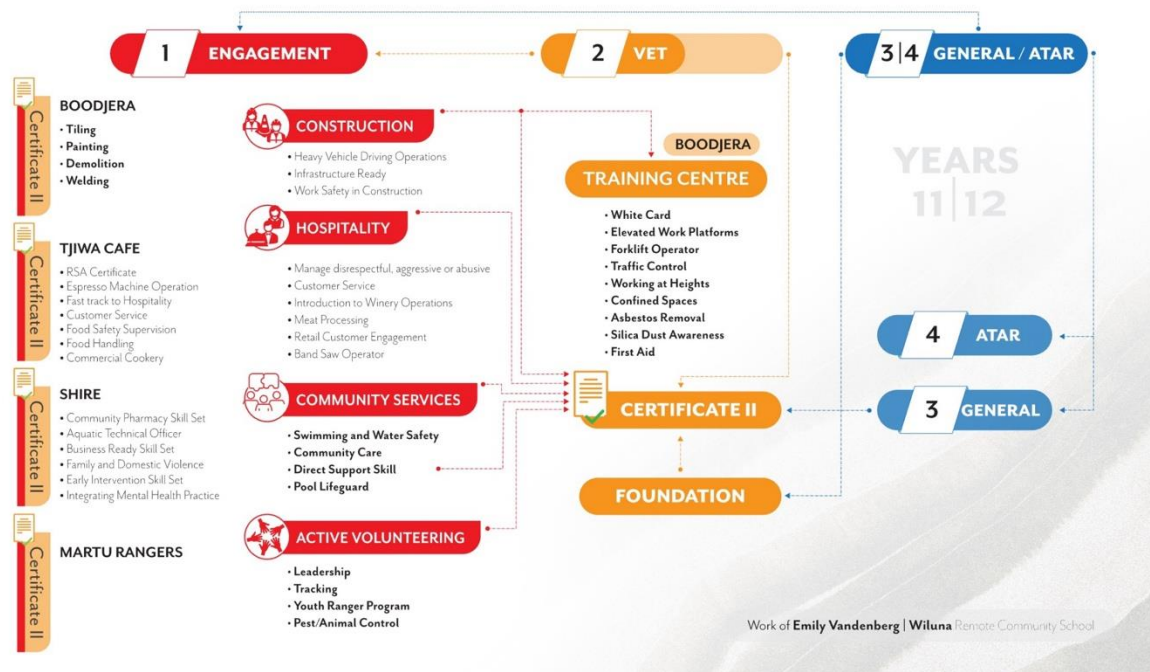
Program	School/s	Program Goals
Dismantle	Leonora	Dismantling youth disadvantage by using bikes to build knowledge, skills, teamwork, mechanical knowledge and confidence
Shooting Stars	Leonora, Laverton	Empowering Aboriginal girls
Two-Way Science	Wiluna	Culturally responsive learning programs
Drone Course	Leonora	Engagement and employment skills
Men's and Women's Camps	Menzies	Culturally responsive learning programs
Basketball	Leonora	Community and self-care

Moving Forward

Deeper ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities is essential, to ensure that the reforms made are well designed and effectively implemented (Davie, 2024). The factors that promote attendance, engagement and retention in educational settings are complex and contextual. Meaningful, engaging and culturally sensitive learning experiences are key factors in motivating students to remain committed to their education, so that they are prepared for life beyond secondary school. Community engagement has commenced as part of what has already been implemented, and the Regional Teaching Team will continue to consult and operationalise by using the SIDE 3 Pillars model and building ongoing collaborations with communities.

Some schools are early adopters of the SIDE 3 Pillars model and have mapped culturally responsive engagement within their schools to qualifications. Figure 2 shows one such map created by Wiluna Remote Community School.

Figure 2. Engagement at Wiluna Remote Community School



Source: Emily Vandenberg, Principal Wiluna Remote Community School

Wiluna Remote Community school has embedded four engagement strategies into its teaching and learning program:

1. The Tjiwa Café is a café set up within the school, where students learn about hospitality and business management. The café provides a rich learning environment, and the skills learnt can be linked to curriculum.
2. Boodjera is a program in construction where students engage in work experience, learning skills that can be mapped to the curriculum.
3. Shire is a community services program, where students learn skills that can be mapped to the curriculum.
4. The Martu Ranger program enables students to learn On-Country with a local ranger group, learning skills about caring for country and environmental science.

The skills of all four strategies are all linked to the curriculum, so that students can be credited with their knowledge.

Conclusion

The work of the Regional Teaching Team is not always straightforward or easy. For example, the team had a bumpy start with a new SIDE Goldfields regional coordinator, a new team and many new SIDE supervisors. However, to try to get things on track, the Team made school visits a priority, teaching students and breaking down barriers with both students and SIDE supervisors. The team is aware that teachers and school leaders in a new context often struggle to embrace new ideas when they are struggling to grasp and make sense of their new environment (Frahm & Cianca, 2021).

The team also recognises that it will take time to build relationships and trust with local communities, in order to deliver appropriate educational outcomes. Whilst there is support in principle from Government agencies, a disconnect still exists between policy and practice in the context of Aboriginal education in schools. The Regional Teaching Team aims to work with Aboriginal communities to provide them with opportunities to communicate their goals and

desires for the education of their children. Traditional measures, that are based on attendance, completion of written tasks and grades, perpetuate failure and do not inspire success or engagement. Engaging communities and involving them in the co-design of relevant programs is important for building student motivation, attendance and improvement.

In relation to the future, the Regional Teaching Team will grow in 2025 and continue to be flexible, with the aim of meeting the needs of students, regardless of their location, background or culture.

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**When the School is the Community, and the Community is the School–
Connectedness is Everything: A Case Study of a Remote School at Yiyili,
Central Kimberley, Western Australia**

Kathryn Thorburn

University of Notre Dame Australia, Nulungu Research Institute

kathryn.thorburn@nd.edu.au

Catherine Ridley

University of Notre Dame Australia, Nulungu Research Institute

catherinebeharrel@gmail.com

Abstract

In 2023, a small team undertook a series of interviews and yarns with staff, students and families at the remote community of Yiyili in the central Kimberley. The case study formed part of a much larger study which sought to understand why attendance rates in remote Aboriginal schools have fallen over recent years, to unpack a whole raft of factors that might explain this, and to also investigate strategies that seem to be encouraging remote kids to attend school. The Yiyili case study demonstrated that heightened connectedness of school and community results in a greater sense of stability and cultural safety for students, school staff and community members. Such a blurring of lines between educational institution and community might not be possible in larger communities, but our study suggests that such institutional openness might prove crucial in cross-cultural circumstances such as remote Indigenous communities.

Keywords: *engagement, community and relationships, Indigenous education, cultural interface, remote schools*

Introduction

The notion of a school as a somehow separate the families and households surrounding it was brought into question by our study of Yiyili Aboriginal Community School ('the School'). In this community, and at this school, the edges of these two concepts were blurred as many community members worked, drew income from and contributed to learning programs at the School. The School, in turn, relied very heavily on support from community members, and performed many roles crucial in a small community, but beyond those normally associated with a mainstream school. This institutional flexibility seemed to work very well for the School. Community members we spoke to embraced the School and school-based education as core elements of community life.

The Yiyili Aboriginal Community School case study formed one of several case studies (See also that contributed to the *Researching school engagement of Aboriginal students and their families from regional and remote areas project* which was funded under the Australian Government's Department of Education *Emerging Priorities Program*. (See also Holmes et al., 2024, Oliver et al., 2024; Guenther et al., 2023 for report and other case studies) The research was conducted during 2023.

Yiyili: The Community and the School

The community of Yiyili is in the centre of the Kimberley, 120 km from Halls Creek and 180 km from Fitzroy Crossing (See Figure 2). It is on an excision from Louisa Downs station, a scenario not unusual in the Kimberley. The School was established by members of the Yiyili community in 1982, one year after the community of Yiyili was founded.

The community sought to establish a school in their community rather than send children to a residential hostel at Halls Creek, 110kms to the community's west, away from family and on other's Country. Since the establishment of the School, six outstation communities have been established on excisions from Louisa Downs. Children residing in these outstations are bussed each day to the School.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data from 2021, there were 366 people living in Yiyili and surrounding communities and 93 of them were children aged under 14. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021)

Yiyili, the School and surrounding outstations are on Gooniyandi Country (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Yiyili Aboriginal Community School prioritises the speaking of Gooniyandi at school and embraces the reality that all students at Yiyili are multilingual—speaking Kriol, Gooniyandi, English and other neighbouring languages such as Walmajerri, Gija and Jaru. The Margaret River, which winds its way behind the community, is a major part of life for members of the community. People spend time on the river, fishing and hunting.

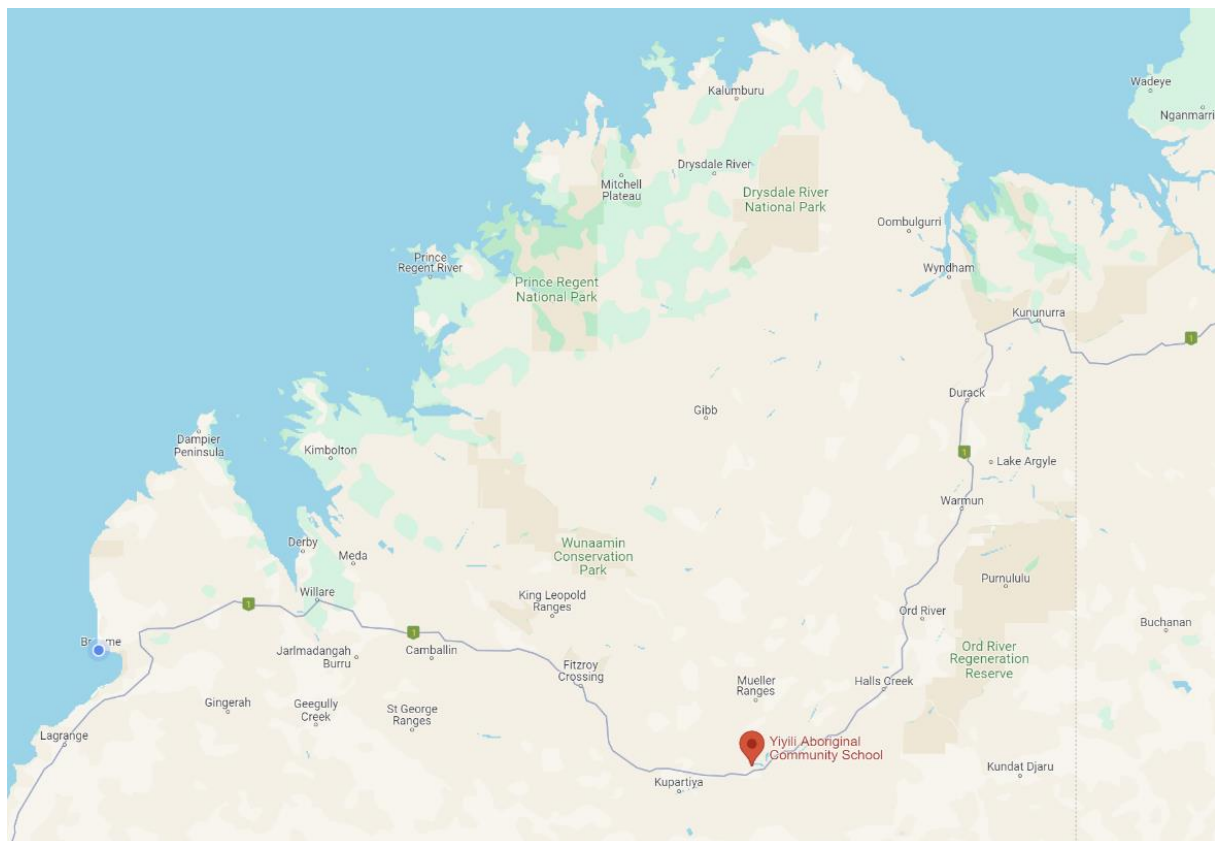
Yiyili Aboriginal Community School is a member of the Association of Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA). All AISWA schools have an Aboriginal governing body which is responsible for staffing, curriculum, school buildings, staff houses and financial accountability (<https://www.ais.wa.edu.au/aics>). AISWA schools must comply with the Western Australian Education Act, and other relevant national education policies, but are independent of governments and belong to, and are governed by, the communities they service.

Figure 1: Surrounding Landscape. Connections to Country form a Vital Part of Yiyili School's Focus



Like many very remote schools in the Kimberley region, the Yiyili Aboriginal Community School forms the backbone of Yiyili and the surrounding communities, providing their main source of stable employment, and acting as community hub for life and activities for the people. Apart from Louisa Downs pastoral station, which is only active seasonally, there are no other enterprises in the community of Yiyili, beside the school and the art centre. The school attracts most of the resources, delivers activities, and welcomes visitors. It provides the venue, and administrative and other support, for socio-cultural events such as the Yiyili Annual General Meeting, other meetings and funerals.

Figure 2: Location map of Yiyili Aboriginal Community School, Kimberley, Western Australia



Staffing

Staffing at the school in 2023 consisted of five full time teaching staff, and 22 non-teaching staff, (or the equivalent of 19.2 full time equivalent non-teaching staff). The non-teaching staff supported the school in areas such as cleaning, cooking, cultural input, on-country trips, language and in-classroom support and activities, and maintaining the food gardens.

Students

In 2023 there were 39 children enrolled at Yiyili Aboriginal Community School. School staff report fluctuations in attendance across the whole school throughout the year. Many factors are responsible for the fluctuations. Weather patterns, cultural imperatives, family responsibilities and family mobility for issues including access to healthcare, all impact the attendance patterns for students. During 2023, the impacts of the flood in Fitzroy Crossing saw numbers increase, and decrease at different times, for reasons outlined further below.

In-community attendance at the School is relatively high (that is, when the students are in community they are generally at school). However, as with all Kimberley schools, student transience, and family mobility, affect attendance. Chronic nonattenders are monitored closely, and staff discuss issues with families to maximise the likelihood that the student will return.

Attendance rates and enrolments have trended downward since 2014. The reasons behind these downward trends likely relate to wider socio-economic pressures on remote living Aboriginal families in the Kimberley where service provision, and government investment in general, has been uneven, and in some areas, trending downwards. (Office of the Auditor General WA 2021)

Research Team

The research team was led by Catherine Ridley, a Wangkatjungka/Ngaanyatjarra woman who resides at a nearby community, working alongside a team of three Yiyili women who were trained in research methodology. These community-based researchers were able to undertake several interviews, encourage community members to complete the survey and provide support and feedback to project team members when visiting the community. These women were supported by Kathryn Thorburn based in Broome.

Interviews

In total, five staff were interviewed extensively, including one teacher who has a 30 plus year association with the school. Two Aboriginal Education Workers and the Principal were interviewed. Seven community members were interviewed at length. Throughout the research process interviewees were reminded of the practices of confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal in plain language.

Findings

Interdependence of School and Community—Administratively, Financially, Socially and Culturally

The data collected via interviews indicated that the interdependence of Yiyili community members and the school is highly valued, and essential to the functioning of each. This interdependence is reflected in the knowledge of school staff that they are, in essence, employed by the community. It is also evidenced in the very strong commitment of school leadership to have an Aboriginal Education Worker present in each classroom, and the valuing of this arrangement by all school staff, and by community members. Aboriginal Education Workers have a role in teaching, rather than just providing a supporting role to the teachers.

This interdependence translates into the education provided at the School being highly valued. Community members are invested in the functioning of the School, through provision of relevant and quality education, and in the attendance and engagement of the children. Community members encourage children to attend School and spoke about the importance of English language literacy: *“Sometimes a kartiya [non-Indigenous person] come and you’ve got to understand what he’s talking about, you’ve got to learn the English”*.

Many people commented on the respectful quality of the relationships at the School and that the community felt listened to—not only via the School Board, but on a day-to-day basis—and that teachers valued the advice from Aboriginal Education Workers into particular students, as well as into delivering lessons that would keep children interested. This open communication enhanced the School’s ability to genuinely care for students, and to be trauma-informed by paying close attention to shifting family dynamics in the community. Aboriginal Education Workers performed an essential advisory role around the challenges facing particular children. The school presents itself as open to the community, not just the students (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The Yiyili Community School is Positioned in the Centre of the Community, and Hosts Many Community Events



Two way Learning: Investment Beyond Tokenistic Approaches

Two way learning is a powerful tool for engagement of children at the School. Aboriginal Education Workers and cultural workers take children onto Country to conduct lessons which are around language and culture, but bring these experiences back into the classroom and reinterpret them around elements of the Western Australian curriculum. Two way learning reinforces the two worlds that families must continually navigate and provides non-local teachers with the opportunity to gain insights into the cultural world views and understandings of their students, and of the wider community.

Local teachers or Aboriginal Education Workers are essential to this approach, providing continuity and connection with Yiyili children, despite the turnover in non-local teachers. They act as knowledge holders, as experts, and where their commitment to the school remains over time, they act as repositories of corporate knowledge as to what has worked and what hasn't worked for Yiyili School children in the past. Two way learning, in Yiyili at least, also requires two way teaching. It requires very good working relationships between Aboriginal Education Workers and non-local staff, and provides opportunities for non-local staff to better understand Gooniyandi culture and language.

Being Purposeful Learners While Having fun, and Feeling Safe

One teacher with a multi-generational association with the School captured a wider approach in the School when she stated that

... it's got to be socially rewarding, I think making sure it's not stressful for children, so making sure that they're not bullied, that school is a safe place and that comes back to the classroom, that it feels like a safe place to learn, you're never made to feel dumb. That's the key thing I think, kids walk in and feel good when they walk into the classroom.

A constant focus on encouragement (rather than assessment) and on building the sense of possibility around kids in the classroom is a strength of the approach to teaching at Yiyili—that education can be empowering, and that children can feel in control of their own progress. This sense of control, of agency, of building confidence in kids, relates to what constitutes a safe learning environment. The school environment is intentionally engaging, with many hands-on

teaching and learning opportunities, for example, including the School's community garden (Figure 4)

Interviewees told us that feeling safe was not only about an absence of bullying, but that it also related to a learning environment where culture, language and values are respected. The cultural awareness of non-local staff is also critical to delivering safe learning spaces at Yiyili School. Relationships between non-local staff and Aboriginal Education Workers are vital to building this awareness. The atmosphere and culture of the school reflects the community and makes it an inviting place for the community to come together (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: The Yiyili Community School Garden Provides a Great Learning Space for Lessons on Nutrition and Diet



Partnerships are Crucial to a Vibrant Remote School

Yiyili Aboriginal Community School relies on collaborations with several external agencies and partners to enhance the programs that are delivered and to support the employment of additional local staff.

The integration of the School with the community has meant that connections are strong and constant. However, it is also the case that a school must meet a range of community expectations, and arguably fill gaps that in other communities would be filled by the community office and/or Chief Executive Officer. These include liaising with external agencies seeking to come to the community to hold meetings, deliver services, or seek community input.

Figure 5: Artwork at the School Reflects a Strong Connection to Country and Culture



The administrative arm of the School, which includes the Principal in this context, is regularly called on to coordinate these visits, provide infrastructure, provide (and maintain) accommodation for visitors and act as an advocate on behalf of the community as a whole.

The value of the School, and the role it plays as facilitator and mediator in these contexts is without question. While the Principal states that he is there “to run a school”, he concedes that he also does everything he can to assist with all of the other business that takes place in a remote community, including providing a venue (the only shaded venue of sufficient size at Yiyili is within the school grounds) for community funerals.

Partnerships also mean that the School atmosphere remains vibrant: “*There is always something happening at the School.*” (Yiyili community member) Health teams, eyes, ears, hip hop groups, allied health programs, government departments—they all deliver their programs via school infrastructure and with school support. This brings community members to the School, makes efficient use of shared resources and keeps energy levels high around the School.

Summary of Implications

Yiyili Aboriginal Community School maintains very strong connections with the community it serves, and these connections underpin very good attendance and retention of students. These connections depend upon the large number of local people employed by the School, people whose employment is generally much more stable than the non-local teachers.

Supporting these local staff to feel valued via training and via proper salaried positions would be an investment in the foundations of that connection going forward. The importance of building cultural awareness and trauma-informed teaching cannot be overestimated. These two elements together can enable dynamic teaching environments where children feel valued, and the education journey is shared between the community, the families and the School. A strengths-based approach pays attention to what children are good at and rewards them for achievements which are context-relevant.

Having community members on the School Board—whose focus is on meeting budgets and meeting policy requirements—is equally as important as having local Indigenous staff being active at all levels of the School. Embedding cultural knowledge in all levels of teaching ensures

that local people contribute this knowledge inside and outside of the classroom. This is critical to the School's relationship with the wider community.

Partnerships with external agencies bring resources to the School environment. They also allow a diversity of other programs—health-related, arts-related, skills-related—which keep the atmosphere of the School dynamic, and allow a whole range of activities to be delivered which would otherwise not occur. These kinds of activities enliven the School—not only for the students, and the teachers, but they also encourage community members to attend the **School** and to get involved.

The School maintains a central presence in the community, and the people of Yiyili feel comfortable there, and welcome there. The School enhances the sense of social harmony and wellbeing in the community.

The School however continues to struggle to recruit quality (external) teaching staff who will commit to staying over multiple years. Other options for local teachers to be 'trained up' are non-existent unless they are prepared to travel to Perth, some 2500km away. Despite the sense that the School is highly valued by the community, the metrics suggest ongoing problems with attendance. Falling enrolment numbers over the previous decade are likely to reflect the declining state of remote community infrastructure and housing across the Kimberley, and associated falling population numbers.

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Case Study of Nawarddeken Academy: On Country Learning in West Arnhem Land

Robyn Ober

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

Robyn.Ober@Batchelor.edu.au

Abstract

In 2023, researchers from the Batchelor Institute worked with staff, students and families from the Nawarddeken Academy in West Arnhem Land, which offers bicultural, community-driven education. Together, they engaged in a series of yarning circles as interviews with staff, students and families. The focus of the study was on retention, attendance and impacts from major events such as COVID-19. Nawarddeken Academy has a long history of fighting for educational rights for their children to learn *on country*, through an Aboriginal-led, controlled and managed model. This fight has spanned 20 years and today Bininj (Aboriginal) people are proud to provide education to their children on their land through *Learning on Country* programs that embed both-ways Bininj and Balanda (Aboriginal and non-Indigenous) knowledge/s into the school's core curriculum. This article tells the story of Nawarddeken Academy and the case study research that was conducted with the school.

Keywords: *On Country learning, First Nations research, remote education, community-based research, student engagement, retention*

The Nawarddeken Story

The Nawarddeken Academy story began in 2002 when Professor Bardayal Lofty Nadjamerrek OAM established the Manwurrk Rangers at Kabulwarnamyo, a forerunner of the company today known as Warddeken Land Management Limited. This ranger program pioneered Australia's first carbon abatement project, allowing Traditional Owners to live and work on their Country.

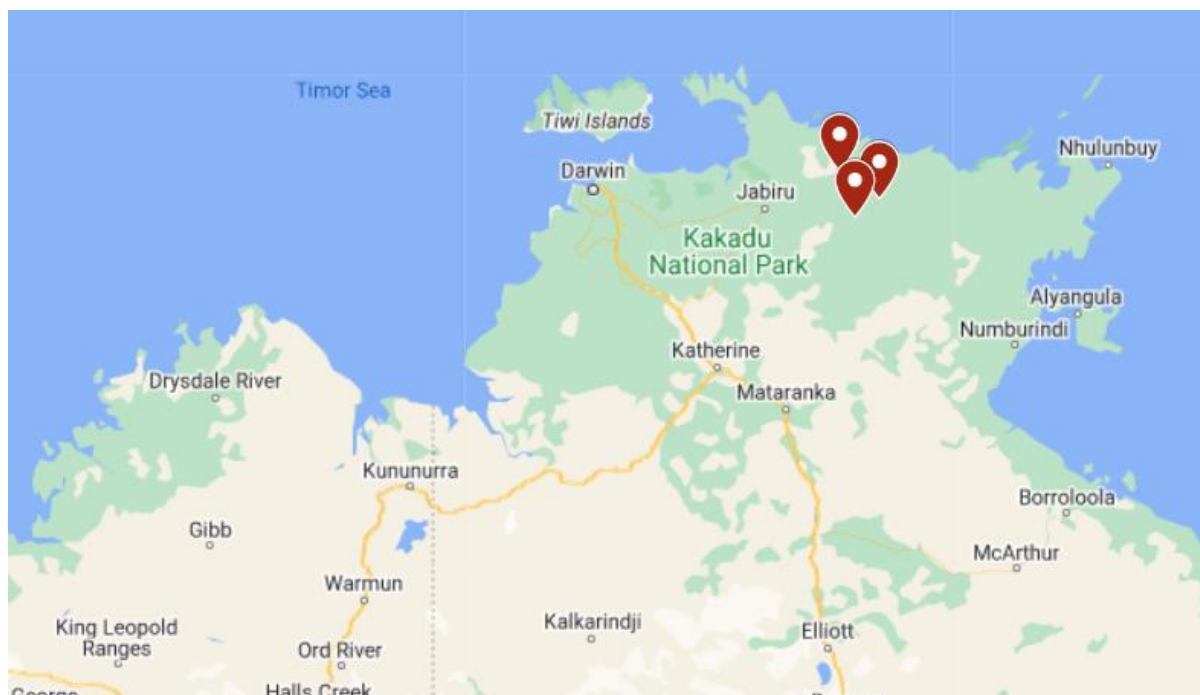
In August 2015, the Nawarddeken Academy was established at the request of Elders from Kabulwarnamyo in West Arnhem Land. The Academy is committed to working towards being a bicultural and bilingual Indigenous school, so that young people can be strong and confident in both worlds (local Aboriginal people: Bininj, and non-Indigenous: Balanda), and ambassadors for Nawarddeken (People of the Stone Country).

At first, the school operated under a Memorandum of Understanding with Gunbalanya School, pending registration as an independent school. Registration was achieved in January 2019. A board oversees the Academy and includes representatives from the three homelands: Kabulwarnamyo, Mamadawerre and Manmoyi (see Figure 1). The combined population of the three sites is about 200 on average, and it varies depending on seasons, ranger activity, cultural events and funerals.

Until 2021, schooling at Mamadawerre and Manmoyi was managed by Gunbalanya School, which offered up to two days per week of schooling using a fly-in, fly-out teacher. From Term 4, 2021, all schools were operating on a five-day-a-week basis. The Academy has had the financial and

logistical support of Warddeken Land Management Limited and a philanthropic organisation, the Karrkad-Kanjaji Trust.

Figure 1: Location map for Nawarddeken Academy at Kabulwarnamyo, Mamadawerre and Manmoyi



Nawarddeken Academy aims to:

- advance Indigenous education in West Arnhem Land;
- support the social, cultural, emotional and physical wellbeing of every child;
- promote intergenerational education where families and communities share learning experiences to conserve Indigenous knowledge and languages;
- empower young people to be strong and confident in Western and Indigenous knowledge systems;
- preserve Nawarddeken languages and culture through bilingual and bicultural experiential learning;
- develop clear pathways for young Indigenous people of West Arnhem Land that match their aspirations and the aspirations of their families. (Nawarddeken Academy Limited, 2024, p. 10)

According to the 2023 My School data (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2024), there are 64 students enrolled at the school. Attendance rates average about 95% across the three sites (ACARA, 2024). Between 2019 and 2021, Batchelor Institute conducted an evaluation of the school. The findings can be found in the evaluation report (Guenther et al., 2022).

The Research

Methodology: Participants and Data Collection

The research project which is reported here (*Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal Students and their Families from Regional and Remote Areas Project*) used a mixed methods research framework. This paper provides a case study of Nawarddeken Academy, one of the schools in the study, and presents only qualitative data. More details about the methodology can be found in the project report (Guenther et al., 2023).

There were three types of participants in the study: students, staff and community members. Two students, 10 staff and 15 community members were interviewed. Data were collected from a workshop held with community-based researchers in April 2023, and site visits to Mamadawerre, Kabulwarnamyo and Manmoyi between 30 August and 1 September, 2023. The data were collected from yarning circles, which is an Indigenous way of coming together, talking and relating. A semi-structured schedule was used to guide these conversations, while prioritising and respecting Indigenous ways of communicating (Walker et al., 2013).

A team of community-based researchers had previously worked with Batchelor Institute on an evaluation of Nawarddeken Academy (see Guenther et al., 2022). Members of the team were invited to a workshop held at Maningrida community in April 2023 (see Figure 2). The purpose of the workshop was to familiarise the team with the questions and refresh skills needed for interviewing community members.

Data were also taken from secondary resources including the *Annual Report* (see e.g., Nawarddeken Academy, 2024) and a video made with the school, both of which include direct quotes from staff, Elders and parents.

Figure 2: Community Researcher Training at Maningrida, April 2023



Note: Photo used with permission from Michelle Bangarr and Robyn Ober

Research Questions

Two research questions guided the project:

1. What has impacted student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools in Northern Territory and Western Australia, and how (including COVID-19 and other events)?

2. What targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies lead to improved student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools of the Northern Territory and Western Australia?

Findings

The themes detailed here are a selection of all the points raised by respondents.

On Country Learning

The strength of Nawarddeken Academy is firstly its position as a place for *Learning on Country*. It is located on the ancestral estates of Bininj, a place of belonging, where Country is described as classroom not constrained by four walls. Learning is intertwined with culture, as one parent suggested:

Culture. We have culture, ceremony, culture days, taking kids out. We give them all this learning, learning traditional, back in all the histories, culture. Song lines and yeah. Looking for bush tucker too, same.

Children and young people see opportunities for rich learning on bush trips and camps, bringing their learning from Country into the school classroom. School is seen as enjoyable, with parents seeing their children happy to be learning alongside other family members and affirming their cultural identity. Importantly too, the distractions that sometimes cause problems and disengagement in community schools are not present. Learning on Country is intrinsically engaging. Coupled with good governance, teaching and leadership, the opportunities for meaning and relevant learning make school an attractive place to be. Attendance is therefore not seen as an issue at Nawarddeken Academy.

Both-Ways Teaching and Learning

An underpinning assumption of Nawarddeken Academy is that it is led by Bininj. Bininj Elders want their children to learn their own knowledge, but they also want them to be strong in Western or Balanda knowledge. These words from an Elder are representative of this aspiration:

And this is the main important thing for us, to teach our kids not only in our Bininj Kunwok (language) but also Balanda (non-Indigenous) education—both. We like to see that so the kids they can move along.

Both-ways teaching and learning draws from the strengths of Bininj and Balanda teachers working together to teach about language, culture, curriculum, literacy, science and mathematics. This approach allows students to relate their on Country learning to what happens in the classroom, making learning relevant, engaging and enriching. It is also a key to community engagement: parents, Elders, and rangers working on Country see how traditional knowledge is applied and connected to Western knowledge.

Connection to Work on Country

Nawarddeken Academy was established because families working on Country wanted a place for their children to learn on Country.

That sense of connection to the Country and work on Country... is pretty powerful and becomes that powerful motivator, when kids see their mum and dad working as rangers. They'll say, I want to be like, I want to be a ranger when I grow up, I want to be a teacher.

This in turn creates an environment where aspirations are based on Country, on role models who work on Country. This feeds into retention, noting that the school currently is registered to provide education to Year 7. Nevertheless, the desire to see the next generation of leaders

emerge has prompted elders to work innovatively towards providing secondary education options.

One parent offered these thoughts about the future:

Well, main focus is kids going to school, to learn. Get better education, graduate here and then they can be our leadership. They're the main focus, our kids. They'll be the leader for us when we die.

Cultural Expectations

The centrality of culture in learning is a strong driver for educational participation and engagement at Nawarddeken Academy. Culture is in the curriculum through going on bush trips, local teachers telling stories, songs taught at school, and language embedded in learning. An Elder offered the following passionate argument for culture:

Like as I said before, in [community], they don't learn much because of teasing, too many violence, not enough song lines there, not enough stories to tell. In here, we can tell so many stories. When we do a big survey, there's a lot of stories on that painting. That's why we want the kids to go to school. You said, why do they want to go to school? Well, they want to learn stories, dreamtime stories.

The focus on culture sets up a learning environment that is entrenched in Bininj values, knowledge and pedagogy, creating an enriching environment where children love to be. Culture and Country are built into the cyclical seasonal curriculum calendar, Kuwarddewardde Malkno (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Nawarddeken Academy's Seasonal Curriculum Calendar: Kuwarddewardde Malkno



Source: Nawarddeken Academy Limited (2022, pp. 38–39)

Enjoyment of Learning

For parents, teachers and students, there is a strong feeling that learning is fun and intrinsically rewarding. It is building young people's confidence and pride, supporting them to safely take risks without fear or shame. One Balanda teacher described these responses to learning:

Now we're getting kids who come to school early, before school starts, so that they can play games where they'll get like a mini whiteboard, they'll sit there and they just want us to call out words and they try and write these words ... and that's because they're enjoying it. Then it became this thing: I want to show myself that I can do this, and I want to improve and I don't feel intimidated.

Others suggested that attendance is not a problem because children want to learn, they want to be with their friends and family, and it is much better than staying home. A series of factors underpin these benefits. Firstly, the school is well resourced and pursues funding for additional projects from philanthropic sources. Secondly, it has a strong governance structure that ensures decisions are made by Bininj, who provide vision and strategic direction. Thirdly, it is about having the right staff: Balanda who are willing to learn and listen, and Bininj who teach from a cultural standpoint, and who are the role models for future generations.

Impact of COVID-19

Several people described the COVID-19 experience as scary. There was some fear about the uncertainties of the disease and what it might cause. However, the school implemented strict rules that, in the most part, meant that the school was able to operate normally for most of the COVID-19 period. Movement restrictions in and out of the bio-security zones did cause some problems, but the bio-security zones also provided a degree of safety and insulation from COVID-19, particularly prior to vaccines becoming available. Vaccine mandates also meant that some staff who did not want to be vaccinated could no longer be employed. Overall, though, COVID-19 had a relatively minimal impact on the school in the three communities.

Strategic Directions

The current strategic directions taken by Nawarddeken Academy to achieve its objectives affirm that there is strong community and staff support for activities that build on aspirations for learning on Country. Local decision making, governance and leadership will continue to be a priority to ensure strong levels of student and parent engagement. The current both-ways educational approach draws students into rich classrooms and on Country learning experiences, creating a safe place, where parents and staff can provide culturally relevant and meaningful opportunities to learn both-ways.

There is also recognition that more needs to be done to offer learning pathways that will ultimately lead to the aspiration of young people graduating on Country. Those pathways will include post-school learning pathways, if Bininj aspirations for qualified Bininj teachers is to be achieved. There is also a need for continued investment in infrastructure and learning resources to support middle and senior years' students. The research also supports the need for an ongoing focus on student wellbeing, and a recognition that differentiated approaches to teaching students of varying academic abilities will need to continue. This should engender feelings of success and pride in achievement. Finally, the current focus on youth leadership will also likely produce outcomes that the whole community can be proud of.

Summary of Implications

1. The school's focus is on creating a positive learning environment where children and young people want to be, to learn and to be happy. This is what produces good attendance.
2. Continued investment in secondary education will create an environment that allows for retention towards graduating on Country and working on Country.

3. Elder, community, and parent involvement in governance, school activities and teaching will continue to support strong student engagement.
4. Post-secondary learning pathways for Bininj staff who want training to be assistant teachers and qualified classroom teachers remain as high priorities.
5. The focus on language, culture and Country, together with culturally relevant curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogies will ensure high levels of community satisfaction, and ultimately learning outcomes that enable students to be proud of their achievements.

Conclusion

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, provide support for disengaged students to improve educational outcomes, provide support for school attendance and completion, and investigate targeted educational support for students. As it turned out, despite the initial fear of COVID-19, the pandemic had relatively little negative impact on Nawarddeken Academy's operations.

Nawarddeken Academy is a unique school with a particular history, and a context framed by land management work in the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area. Generalising the findings of this one case to other remote schools is problematic for this reason. However, there are some key principles that we can deduce from the learnings of this case study, and these should act as positive enablers:

- Strong local governance, Elder vision and leadership support and drive community engagement and enhance the relevance of the school's learning programs for young people.
- A well-resourced school creates choices and opportunities that would not be otherwise possible. This school has demonstrated how important it is to access resources to match the aspirations and needs of students and staff.
- Language, culture and Learning on Country, coupled with visible pathways to working on Country, are primary drivers for student engagement.
- Being a small school can be an advantage, making it easier to connect with community.

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Building Language, Literacy, Numeracy, and Digital Skills with Aboriginal Rangers in the Northern Territory

Jaemie Page

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education

jaemie.page@batchelor.edu.au

Abstract

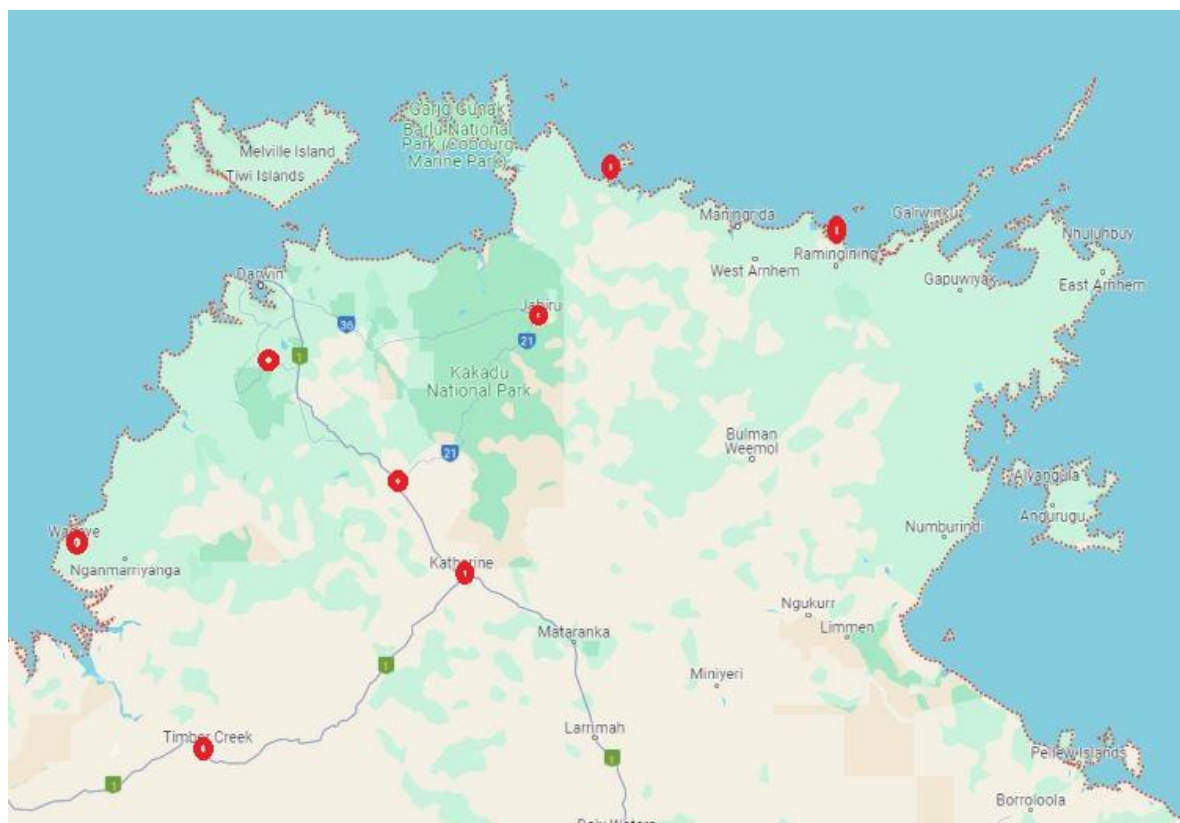
Ranger programs across North Australia are a success story, providing important environmental, social and cultural services that help people get back out on their Country to do vital work, such as carbon abatement fire programs, weed and feral animal management, cultural site maintenance, and Learning on Country programs for youth. Many rangers struggle with the English language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills needed to participate effectively in work and training. The Batchelor Institute Conservation and Land Management team have developed effective language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills programs through Foundation Skills Training being delivered across the Northern Territory top end and recently Uluru. With extensive knowledge and experience in ranger work, trainers can develop and adapt language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills programs that are contextualised to the work of rangers and meet their needs as well as those of their host organisations. Secure, targeted funding can provide long-term support to further develop these programs and better prepare and support learners with training and work. This document outlines existing work and how it can be expanded across the region.

Keywords: *Aboriginal rangers, Australian Core Skills Framework, digital skills, foundation skills, language skills, literacy, numeracy*

Overview

For the past few years, the Conservation and Ecosystem Management team at Batchelor Institute has been successfully delivering literacy and numeracy/foundation skills programs to help Aboriginal rangers across the Northern Territory with workplace language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills. These programs are conducted in the locations marked in red on Figure 1, as well as recently for the Mala Rangers at Uluru.

We started this work in recognition that many rangers struggle with the language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills needed for ranger work and for getting the most out of training. We recognise that not only do rangers need some level of English language, but that each area of work has its own language which makes it more complicated for people for whom English is not a first language (e.g., maritime language for coxswains, scientific languages, legislative languages and terminology). Underpinning these languages are assumed world views, which need to be acknowledged explicitly and alongside the Indigenous knowledges, languages and world views that the learners bring to work and training.

Figure 1: Map of the Existing Sites of the Program

Note: The locations from left to right are Wadeye, Timber Creek, Batchelor, Pine Creek, Katherine, Kakadu, Waruwi and Milingimbi.

Building language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills enables rangers to understand more about what they are doing and why they are doing it. Having a better understanding of what they are doing inspires greater engagement in work and training, which in turn improves motivation and opportunities to build language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills in real-world applicable contexts. This virtuous circle leads to improved worker retention, participation and workplace productivity.

As an example, many rangers across the top end are involved in carbon abatement fire programs. Organisations get funding via carbon credits to reduce annual emissions from wildfires through rangers doing early *cooler* burning and other measures to reduce late season destructive fires. Underpinning these projects is a need to understand a range of concepts and skills: climate change, photosynthesis, vegetation mapping, what are fossil fuels, how wildfires and burning fossil fuels release emissions, how emissions are measured, and all the numeracy required (e.g., graphs, mapping, averages, multiplication, funding).

Helping rangers understand all of these promotes greater engagement, participation, leadership and ownership of projects. Being engaged in these projects provides immersion in an environment of language, literacy, numeracy, communication and use of digital technology, making language, literacy, numeracy and digital learning relevant and useful. Learning is consolidated by ongoing involvement.

We have been delivering language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills training using the Foundation Skills training package, *FSK10119 Certificate I in Access to Vocational Pathways*. The name *Foundation Skills* is very apt; it is exactly what is needed: foundations, which are too often overlooked in work and training. Figure 2 illustrates this type of training. It shows Thamarrurr

Rangers in Wadeye weighing wood before and after burning. They are investigating the question: Where does the lost weight go?

Figure 2: Thamarrurr Rangers Weighing Wood Before and After Burning



Projects such as this require long-term commitment to build trust and relationships. We work very closely with project partners to design training that meets the needs of rangers and their host organisations, and they include:

- NLC – Northern Land Council;
- MOPRA – Milingimbi Outstations Progress Resource Aboriginal Corporation;
- TNRM – Territory Natural Resource Management;
- Djurrubu Rangers – Gundjehmi Aboriginal Corporation;
- Thamarrurr Development Corporation, Wadeye;
- Mala Rangers, Uluru – Parks Australia.

Australian Core Skills Framework: A Framework for Monitoring Status and Progress

Language, literacy and numeracy programs are guided by, and benchmarked against, the Australian Core Skills Framework (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2020). This is

a tool which assists both specialist and non-specialist English language, literacy and numeracy practitioners describe an individual's performance in the five core skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy.

It provides a consistent national approach to identifying and developing the core skills in three diverse contexts: personal and community; workplace and employment; and education and training. In particular, it offers:

- *shared concepts and language for identifying, describing and discussing the core skills*
- *a systematic approach to benchmarking, monitoring and reporting on core skills performance. (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2020)*

For a full explanation of the Australian Core Skills Framework and how it works, go to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2020) webpage: [Australian Core Skills Framework](#).

Many rangers in the Northern Territory communities operate at Pre-level 1 to Level 1, the lowest levels of the framework. Learners at these levels require high level structured support, highly familiar contexts, and concrete tasks with a single step (Department of Employment and

Workplace Relations, 2017). Our language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills programs are targeted at supporting rangers to build from Pre-level 1 to Levels 1 and 2. Table 1 shows the progression performance indicators for those levels.

Table 1: An Overview of the Key Performance Variables for Pre-Level, Level 1 and Level 2 from the Australian Core Skills Framework

LEVEL	SUPPORT	CONTEXT	TEXT COMPLEXITY	TASK COMPLEXITY
Pre-level 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • guided by an expert or mentor • highly structured support • modelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • familiar contexts • concrete and immediate • restricted range of contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simple, short texts • explicit purpose • limited and personally relevant vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concrete tasks with a single step • includes copying, naming, matching, limited ordering, simple recognising
Level 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working alongside a mentor • prompts and advice provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • highly familiar contexts • concrete and immediate • restricted range of contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • short and simple • highly explicit purpose • limited, highly familiar vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concrete tasks of 1 or 2 steps • includes locating and recognising
Level 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may work with a mentor • support available on request 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • familiar and predictable contexts • limited range of contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simple familiar texts with clear purpose • familiar vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explicit tasks with a limited number of familiar steps • includes identifying, simple interpreting, simple sequencing

Source: Based on Department of Employment and Workplace Relations ([2017](#))

A key objective is for the rangers to see themselves as learners and gain confidence to have-a-go, therefore opening doors for building skills and experience. The Australian Core Skills Framework allows us to get an idea where learners are at, and how they are progressing with training.

We recognise that this framework is focused towards English language and concepts. At Batchelor Institute, we take a both-ways approach to language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills teaching, by developing shared languages around work concepts, thus building Western and Indigenous ways of understanding side-by-side. We start by recognising and building on learner identity, their background, experiences, goals, aspirations and challenges. We aim to make the training fit the learner, not the learner fit the training. Having ranger coordinators, managers and support staff also understand or at least be aware of this framework, and where their workers are at, is highly beneficial for their organisations to help rangers progress in a sequential manner and not be overwhelmed by unrealistic expectations.

Foundation Skills Training Packages

As well as the foundation skills described above, there are *foundation skills training packages* that are designed to address and complement learning at different levels, from Pre-level 1 and beyond. These include:









- FSK10119 Certificate I in Access to Vocational Pathways;
- FSK10219 Certificate I in Skills for Vocational Pathways;
- FSK20119 Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways.

The units are adaptable to different contexts. The Batchelor Institute Conservation and Ecosystem Management team have been delivering FSK10119, contextualised around ranger work, as an introduction to conservation and ecosystem management training. It is a chance to get to know learners, identify their interests, goals, and Australian Core Skills Framework levels. It provides an opportunity to introduce and explore foundational core skills and help people enjoy learning before having to apply the skills to more complex workplace tasks.

For example, numeracy units, such as *FSKNUM003 Use whole numbers and halves for work* and *FSKNUM004 Use basic and familiar metric measurements for work*, provide a scaffolded introduction to doing tasks such as mixing chemicals, 2-stroke or fire bug fuel, and related conservation and ecosystem management units. The foundation skills units are delivered as an introduction or alongside vocational education and training (VET) units, allowing us more time to help learners explore and play with numeracy, to take away the fear many people have of maths, and to have the confidence to have-a-go. When learners are ready, we can begin to apply these skills for workplace tasks and VET units, such as *AHCCHM201 Apply chemicals under supervision*.

Learners use skills to create documents like the ones in Figure 3. Creating their own documents or resources from scratch, rather than just filling in templates or answering questions, provides time and opportunities to think, explore and question more deeply, and uses a variety of core skills: reading, numeracy, digital. The learners create a resource they are proud of and can hang in the workplace for future reference.

Figure 3: Two Examples of Student Work

2-stroke mix - 50 parts petrol:1 part oil		Chemical mixing rate	
Petrol - 50 	2-stroke - 1 	Roundup 570: 7ml for 1L 	
5L 	100 ml	Backpack 10 litres 	70ml
10 L 	200 ml		
20 L 	400 ml		For a 200 Litre tank we need 1400ml roundup

The *FSK10119 Certificate I in Access to Vocational Pathways* course is very useful for providing some structure for training and introducing workplace language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Without ongoing opportunities to practise skills with support and mentoring, the skills can be lost. Consolidating skills takes time and there is a need to use them regularly before learners are ready to move on to higher level courses.

Monitoring Improvements in Core Skills: Pre-training Assessment

LLND projects aim to improve levels of one or more of the core skills over time. To document this, we need a pre- and ongoing assessment process and tools to build an Australian Core Skills Framework profile, a picture of levels across the five skills. The standard way of doing this is to have a test that progressively gets harder until the learner cannot do anymore, and the levels are scored against this progress. There are many problems with doing this sort of testing, especially for remote learners for whom English is not a first language.

As Table 1 shows, language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills are inherently linked to context, especially at the lower levels of the Australian Core Skills Framework. Finding standardised tests that create fair and equal contexts is virtually impossible. Asking questions using traffic lights, fire trucks, stop signs, cafes and all sorts of common city features may be alien and unfamiliar to remote learners who do not see these in their communities. With the move to using phones for so many tasks, other common themes for language, literacy, numeracy and digital exercises, such as analogue clocks and calendars, are becoming less familiar.

The digital Pre-Training Assessments I have sampled are online and require access to good Internet, which is often not available in remote communities. Learners need an email account to get a link, but this is something that many do not have and would never use again. Setting this up takes time and effort and isolates learners. Once they get to the test, there are several steps to click through before they start: agreements, terms and conditions requiring high level English comprehension. Doing all this is harder than the test, and most learners we work with would not be able to get through this process. The tests start at a high level and get easier if you get things wrong. Failing from the first step is not the way we want to build confidence and engagement.

Many of the learners we work with have limited English, are shy with new people, and nervous to have-a-go. Some are very young. These characteristics can often be mistaken for low level communication and other skills, despite the fact they are often fluent in multiple languages. There have been many times in my experience when it has taken a few days for people to start to be confident to demonstrate their skills at higher levels than originally assessed.

The concept of testing and seeing where people fail is against all the reasons we do this training: trying to build skills and confidence to have-a-go, and to feel supported and culturally safe. We aim to remove the element of testing in this way. The levels of the Australian Core Skills Framework are worked out through the process of developing a learning plan, where learners can write or draw their responses and get help as needed. Through these conversations and exercises, we build a profile of levels in oral communication, reading, writing and learning. We then introduce supported numeracy exercises and further reading and writing exercises, as needed, to complete the profile.

This strength-based approach incorporates assessment into introductory training in a constructive way that avoids confronting learners, especially new learners, with a harsh pass/fail paradigm of testing. We build on existing skills to encourage confidence and willingness to participate and learn.

Foundations Skills for Rangers

Table 2 demonstrates some of the areas where core skills are needed for ranger work. Work tasks usually involve several skills. For example, following herbicide mixing instructions from a label requires reading and numeracy skills, as well as learning skills, to show initiative or to seek help or resources as needed.

Table 2: Foundations Skills for Rangers' Work

Foundation skills	Application
Oral communication	Presenting at forums and conferences Presenting to groups: Tour guide, talking to school groups Participating in team meetings and planning Reporting work outcomes, problems, issues
Reading and writing (often go together)	Labels, signs, maps, manuals, training materials, timesheets, reporting apps, work documentation, legal regulations, work contracts
Numeracy	Mixing herbicide, 2-stroke, bug fuel Reading gauges, signs Recording: Timesheets, chemical use, marine debris Mapping, distances, areas Timesheets, plans and dates Budgets
Learning	Developing learning goals, seeking out support, recognising and addressing barriers, taking responsibility for learning
Digital	Mapping, GPS, reporting apps, digital gauges, NAFI (fire mapping and reporting)

Project-Based Implementation of Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Skills Training

Foundation skills training is contextualised around ranger work, and this varies from group to group. The following description gives an overview of how training develops to meet the needs of the group.

We start with developing learning plans, as described above, exploring their work and learning, then move into general numeracy using worksheets. We describe these exercises as warm-ups for the brain. Most rangers have not done any numeracy like this for years. In our experience, they love the maths, coming to it from a place where it is practical and useful for work. This is unlike school, where many were not engaged or interested, and could not relate the learning to their everyday lives. The satisfaction and pride of completing worksheets and understanding content is very evident.

From basic number patterns and exercises, we move to units of measurement and conversions from grams to kilograms, metres to kilometres, and so on. We use workplace tools, such as measuring jugs, spray tanks and scales, to bridge bookwork with practical application. Figure 4 shows numeracy in practice. In particular, Wagiman and Wardaman rangers in Katherine are doing foundation skills training around weed and chemical use.

Figure 4: Wagiman and Wardaman Rangers Doing Foundation Skills Training Around Weed and Chemical Use at Katherine



Reading and writing skills are further developed by exploring workplace resources, such as field guides, signs, chemical labels and standard operating procedures, and employment documents, such as codes of conduct, timesheets, and terms and conditions. Figure 5 shows rangers sharing plant knowledge at Uluru.

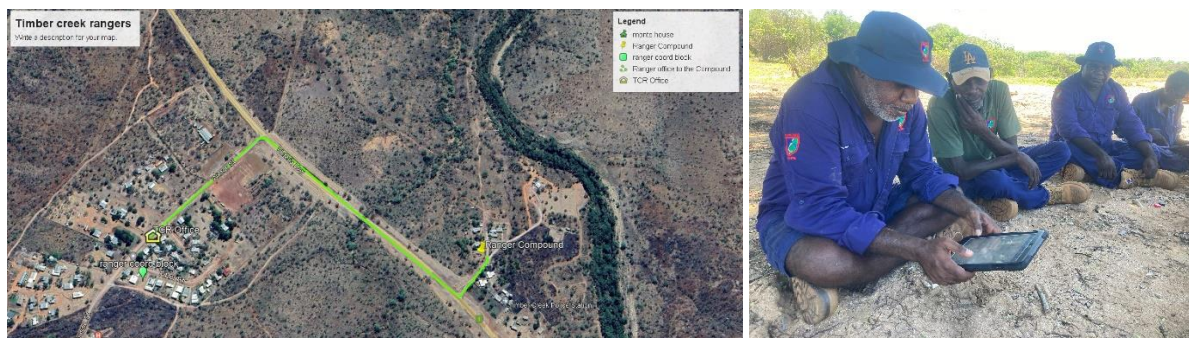
Figure 5: Sharing Plant Knowledge at Uluru



Digital skills are practised using computers and tablets. Google Earth is a great tool for learning computer skills, such as left and right, click, scroll and drag, while exploring Country. Creating tracks and points for places they know builds the skills required for mapping fire lines and points later.

Rangers use a variety of tablet applications for work, such as monitoring biodiversity, mapping weeds, and doing vehicle checks. It is a common request from ranger organisations to help rangers engage more with this digital technology. Figure 6 shows rangers using tablets for mapping and reporting biosecurity information.

Figure 6: Creating Maps in Google Earth and Using Tablets for Reporting Biosecurity



To develop communication skills, rangers regularly present their work to build confidence in speaking. This also helps to consolidate knowledge, by having to explain it to others. This can be through class presentations or the use of a camera to make short videos, as in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Rangers Presenting to Classmates



Bringing it all together into a poster, a work report, a PowerPoint presentation or a movie creates a valuable resource for the workplace, and holistically integrates all core skills and digital skills. Figure 8 shows some examples of how we do this.

This foundation skills training gives rangers time and skills to reflect and report on their work and livelihoods, something that does not often happen in the day-to-day busyness of ranger work and trying to meet deadlines. The foundation skills training provides a great introduction to a lot of these skills and concepts. Ongoing mentoring and support are needed to consolidate these learnings and build them into practice.

Figure 8. Examples of Student Work

Mala walk

This is the [Mala walk](#).

Mala rangers are setting traps for the cats.

Rangers – Activity Report

Date:	20.06.2024	Location:	Uluru
Activity:	Cat trap	Ranger/Team Members:	Mala

Photos

Activity Comments/Description

We are setting traps for the cats

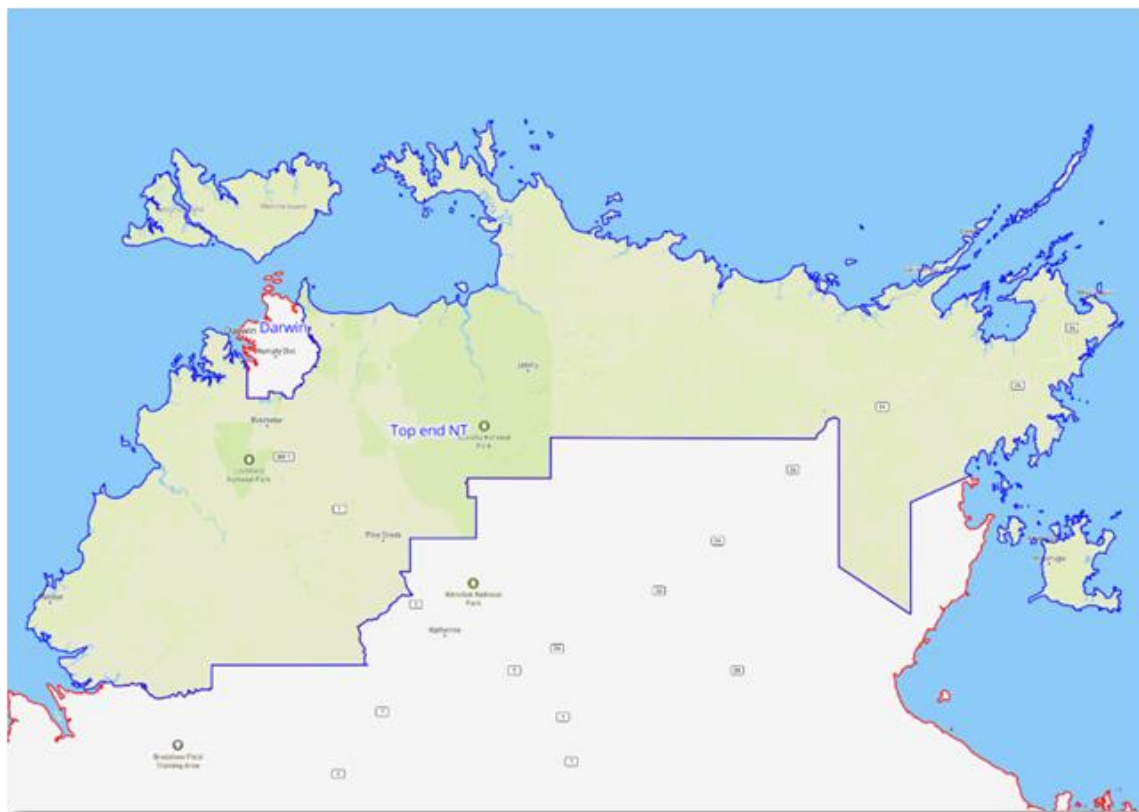
Future Reference Comments, Notes and/or Recommendations:

We need to check the traps early in the morning.

Future Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Skills Projects

Batchelor Institute has been successful in winning [Skills for Education and Employment \(SEE\)](#) funding for the Northern Territory top end region (see the green shaded area in Figure 9). This is an Australian Government program that has “the aim of improving access to training for all adult Australians seeking to build their language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills” (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2024).

Figure 9: The Top End Region of the Northern Territory



The funding will enable us to provide ongoing support for rangers and enable them to build on these skills and be willing and able to participate more effectively in larger, long-term projects with the underpinning training that is needed. Such projects include:

- **Fire/carbon projects:**
There is a lot of underpinning knowledge needed around climate change, emissions, and the role of burning. Rangers also need numeracy, mapping, communication and digital skills, as well as ongoing skills in fire planning, reporting and communicating, and practical skills to do the work.
- **Tourism and presenting to an audience:**
Whether for speaking to masses of tourists or small school groups or presenting at conferences or anywhere in between, many rangers want to be more confident about speaking up. This involves building confidence to talk about what they do. Hearing about tips and tricks to overcome shyness and learning to not be overwhelmed by it all are useful strategies to create opportunities for employment and networking, to demonstrate pride in sharing culture, and being recognised for who they are and what they do.
- **Healthy Country Planning:**
Engaging with Healthy Country Plans and making them language accessible, adaptable and dynamic for rangers is important, so that plans do not get left on the shelf. These plans often

underpin ranger work and their organisations' priorities, but they can quickly become dated if not applied and reviewed. The more understanding rangers have of these plans, the more they can engage and have a say in how plans are implemented and developed over time to meet the needs of their workplace and communities. These skills also apply to other plans, such as regional weed plans, fire plans, and cultural site management plans that usually sit under Healthy Country Plans. It is important to make these plans accessible, dynamic and reflexive to changing needs, conditions and people, by keeping them current and useful.

- **Coxswains:**
Sea rangers are required to do some level of coxswains' training to operate boats at a professional standard and this requires Level 1 or Level 2, depending on job requirements. This is a highly complex course, full of maritime language and concepts, numeracy, laws, regulations and standards, and it has the requirements of closed-book assessments. A lot of pre-training work is needed to get rangers ready for these courses.

We are developing applications for Round 2 of Skills for Education and Employment funding, to extend the project to the southern areas of the Northern Territory. The locations for which funding has been applied are indicated in the white shaded area of Figure 9. Future projects will start with the basic language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills introduced in the foundation skills training we are currently doing. Building a long-term relationship with learners is needed to build their skills and trust, to be open to support and to consolidate learning. Training needs to be flexible to meet changing needs and priorities as learners grow in confidence and willingness to engage more deeply with work.

Secure, targeted language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills funding, such as Skills for Education and Employment, with good industry partnerships will enable us to plan and provide the long-term support and capacity-building needed to help rangers to build skills and take on more ownership and leadership of these important environmental, social and cultural projects. These projects provide much needed employment and education opportunities for rangers, helping people access Country and cultural sites, and to look after Country. The resources, such as books, movies and posters, that we create in doing projects will provide much needed resources for community, schools and young rangers, and have a flow on effect to building language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

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