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PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

RURAL CONNECTIONS

BOOK REVIEW

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Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia

Rural Education for Regional and Community Development

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Abstract

Education in any of its forms (early years, primary, secondary, tertiary, and adult education) in rural and remote communities, plays a critical role in sustaining and developing regions. In this issue the articles describe programs and approaches that work to build the regional workforce and create socially inclusive communities. The articles include research that addresses concerns about attraction and retention of teachers, about the relationships and partnerships that improve learning outcomes, and about the importance of place consciousness in regional, rural, and remote contexts. The Rural Connections articles document good practice in providing access to tertiary education that otherwise would not be available, to grow the local workforce and provide pathways and awareness for young people considering their career options. In this editorial we consider the findings presented using a policy and theoretical framework to help us consider the dynamics of rural education as an enabler for regional and community development.

Keywords: *workforce shortages, regional development, rural education, teacher attraction, teacher retention*

Introduction

The latest Australian federal government report on regional, rural and remote jobs and skills continues previous public policy efforts in identifying pressures and drivers of regional, rural and remote labour market performance to support communities outside the metropolis (Houghton et al., 2023; Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). From the outset, this report makes clear that Australia remains an urbanised country where different forms of capital (human, financial, cultural) flow at a greater volume and pace in capital cities. Nevertheless, it also reaffirms the positive demographic trend of migration to the regions that was increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. People, human capital, are critical for the development of regional, rural and remote areas (Houghton et al., 2023; Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). This migratory pattern continues post-COVID-19, albeit with some areas benefiting more than others. This is not news for people living in regional, rural and remote communities. It has well been established that regional coastal areas have benefited from population growth more than other regional, rural and remote places in the last quarter of a century (see Argent et al., 2018; Cook & Cuervo, 2020; Li et al., 2024). Similar imbalances in migration can be found in labour skill supply with remote areas experiencing a greater shortage than other non-metropolitan places (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). Other differences between regions can be found in the provision of higher education and vocational education opportunities, including tertiary studies completion and local skills development.

This report, *Towards a Regional, Rural and Remote Jobs and Skills Roadmap* (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024), does a good job of enumerating challenges and opportunities for regional, rural and remote areas, including identifying broader drivers, such as housing, access to services, and transport and infrastructure, and their impact on jobs, skills and demographic development. While the report is clear on the shortcomings, successes and opportunities for the regional, rural and remote tertiary sector, universities and vocational education providers, it fails to make the connection between jobs, skills and demographic development to schooling. This new set of articles in the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* contributes to make the link between schooling and regional, rural, and remote development. It does so by emphasising the role of teachers and schools in community development, the importance of place in teacher retention as well as in the education of a local workforce, and by highlighting programs and practices that grow a local workforce.

Rural Education, Mobility and the Development of Local Workforces and Communities

It is surprising that rural schools are often missing from regional, rural, and remote labour market analysis. After all, they are a significant institution in the socialisation of children and young people, including on their education of the relevance of work and place. Teachers are in the frontline of this struggle to recognise and highlight the importance of local communities. Indeed, when rural schools close, the impact on communities is felt both from a social and economic position (Haynes, 2022; Lehtonen, 2021). This is not to say that in some instances schools educate their youth to leave their communities. Corbett's (2007) seminal book, *Learning to Leave*, long demonstrated how sometimes rural schools become talented-export industries by making sure their best students earn a place in metropolitan tertiary education institutions or urban labour markets. This trend has been found elsewhere in rural education, including in Australia (Cuervo, 2014; Cuervo, 2016) and elsewhere (see Biddle & Azano, 2016; Stenseth & Rød, 2022 for international perspectives).

Corbett's (2007) contribution includes the original proposition that there is a mobility imperative for rural youth to imagine their future outside their local community. In many instances teachers generate this imperative through best intentions by making connections for rural students of their world with the wider world. Drawing on Massey (1994, p. 154), teachers can build a "*sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world*", that can create for young people the imagination of building their biographies outside their local communities. This valorisation of the urban youth transitions can also be found in education research and policy—where the urban is often constituted as the norm and the rural lagging behind (see Guenther et al., 2015). Finally, graduate teachers making their first teaching experiences in rural schools can also be expected to return to the city as they struggle to cope with living away from family and significant ones, and amenities and services that they take for granted in metropolitan areas (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Guenther et al., 2023; Willis & Louth, 2024).

Amidst this backdrop of heightened mobility, the rural education and rural sociology literature has recently been soaked with evidence of young people, teachers and other segments of the population staying, moving or returning to regional, rural and remote areas (Cook & Cuervo, 2020; Guenther et al., 2024; Ravn, 2022; Waite, 2022). These studies have served to demystify that rural youth lack aspirations. Unfortunately, it has been often posited in education policy that young people outside the metropolis lack the capacity to aspire—particularly to imagine a future in their communities (Bradley et al., 2008). This deficit approach to rural ways of being has been rebutted by research, as cited above, and by policy information that shows the growing workforce in regional, rural, and remote areas (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024).

Key in this capacity to aspire to stay in a local regional, rural, and remote community is the work of teachers. Despite the well documented teacher shortages in rural and remote areas

(see Guenther et al., 2023), those teachers working at the coalface of rural education have a significant responsibility to develop in students a sense of place that is not extroverted. Indeed, throughout the collection of articles offered in this issue, the idea of place seems key for community sustainability and workforce wellbeing. As teachers are at the centre of education and learning, developing a place consciousness on them and subsequently on students and the community at large seems to be the first stone to build a regional, rural, and remote workforce that can support local areas.

This development of place consciousness and/or the relevance of place is embedded in most of the articles. The role and importance of place is discussed throughout this issue in teachers' professional work, within school—community relationships, and on the idea of 'funds of knowledge' in students' learning. In this way, the link between place, rurality, schools, and teachers connects with the idea of workforce and community development. Other articles make this connection in a more explicit way. For example, there are articles on the importance of growing your own workforce as an antidote to shortages of skills and labour. This includes bringing to sharp relief the pivotal role that local tertiary education institutions, such as regional university centres and hubs (for example Stone et al., 2022), occupy in the empowerment of a workforce and community capacity. Ultimately, this collection of articles makes the link between the different stages of formal education, from early childhood to tertiary education, and the empowering and development of communities outside the metropolis. By looking at the big picture of the nexus between education, labour and place, this issue of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* aims to contribute to evidence for the robust sustainability of regional, rural, and remote people and places. In what follows, we offer a brief description of each article.

Articles in this Issue

Mary-Anne MacDonald and colleagues open the series by discussing the role of place consciousness and connectedness on teacher retention. They find two cohorts in their research: those who are *place conscious* and those who are *place ignorant*. The former group engages well in community, the latter does not, and experiences negative wellbeing. They argue that place ignorance "*can provide teachers the opportunity to socialise in a homogenously White setting which… is detrimental to the development of true belongingness and cultural responsiveness in communities of a mixed racial demographic*". (p. 8)

They go on to argue that:

> *Aboriginal cultural responsiveness learning which is specific to the location and community should be provided in all schools that service towns with sizeable Aboriginal populations, even if the school has few Aboriginal children enrolled, as the impact on the wider community of ignorant teachers reinforcing racial stereotypes and divisions can be significant. (p. 12)*

We are sure many of us have thought this (or even experienced it ourselves): "*The tyranny of distance is often perceived as the greatest challenge for teacher retention in regional and remote schools in Australia. Perhaps more accurately, it is the tyranny of placelessness*". (p. 12) To remedy this, the authors push responsibility for place-consciousness, back to the systems that import people into rural and remote communities to fill workforce gaps.

> *The onus is on systems (government policy, Initial Teacher Education, graduate induction, and rural teacher support programs) to increase teachers' capacity to value and contribute effectively to remote and regional experiences. (p. 12)*

This is not a new suggestion (Thiele et al., 2023; White, 2015) and is consistent with high level calls for better selection and preparation processes for pre-service teachers, with the aim of reducing

teacher turnover (Halsey, 2018). However, in terms of rural community development, we think one of the key points that emerges from this paper is the need to go beyond importing people to fill skills gaps to a place where social inclusion—tapping into the cultural capital of communities—is the driver for recruitment and professional learning opportunities.

As noted in our introduction, teacher shortages in regional and remote areas have a significant impact on schools and communities. Claire Bartlett and colleagues focus on attraction, considering the impact of partnerships on employment outcomes, and addressing critical workforce shortages in rural and regional areas. They see partnerships between institutions and regional/remote schools as a vehicle for understanding the dynamics of pre-service teacher professional experiences. Indeed, not so long ago we devoted a whole issue to the role that partnerships play in attracting and retaining staff (see Cuervo & Davie, 2023; Dollinger et al., 2023; Thiele et al., 2023).

Mentor availability and capacity were identified as issues that affected experience. One strategy suggested to address attraction and therefore employment was 'context matching' where an attempt to bring together the needs of the individual pre-service teacher and the regional/remote school they were destined for, but perhaps what is really needed is one that looks for flexible pre-service teachers "*to become reflective practitioners who can adapt their skills to a range of contexts and the diverse needs of learners*" (Stahl et al., 2022, p. 1). The missing part of this paper was the limited discussion about the role of community in supporting professional experiences for pre-service teachers. The authors push the responsibility for improving experience back to initial teacher education programs, which may or may not have a connection with a range of communities (Harris et al., 2025). Connection with community matters and does affect the experiences in professional experience programs, as noted in the article by Macdonald and colleagues.

The other issue not discussed here (perhaps because it was out of scope for the researchers) is the importance of home-grown graduates. That is, there is an embedded assumption that teachers will by default imported from areas that are not rural and not local. This assumption is challenged later in the Rural Connections articles by Ashenden and Millington, Wuttke and Ashenden, and Barry and Samson, who all talk about the need for communities to grow their own teachers and professionals more generally.

Sharon Louth picks up similar themes in her article on professional dissonance and developing a regional/rural/remote consciousness. She asserts that teacher effectiveness/readiness is affected by development of rural consciousness. In the quote that follows we see how teachers can effect rural consciousness in themselves by taking initiatives that build the foundations required for teachers to develop a sense of belonging.

> *Participating in community events enabled the teachers within this study to establish meaningful connections and laid the foundations for building a strong sense of place… Such community activities involved attending and organising community events like barbecues, and enjoying the natural environment while hiking, fishing and swimming. Taking part in such activities enabled teachers to ground themselves with the environment and make deep connections to their sense of place. (p. 46)*

But what is missing here is an appreciation of the impact of these engagements on the community itself—for sustainability through volunteering and participation. Often, as discussed earlier, the impact of schools on communities is most strongly felt when they close (Haynes, 2022). While they are open, they may be taken for granted, but schools and their teachers have a considerable impact on the life of a rural community.

The other point we would raise is that generalisation of regional/rural/remote experience may unwittingly conflate the differences that exist between the three representations of rurality. As

we noted in the introduction to this editorial (with reference to Argent et al., 2018; Cook & Cuervo, 2020; Li et al., 2024), the post-COVID drift of people moving to regional coastal communities is evidence that regional communities have an attractiveness that rural and remote communities may not.

In her article, Olivia Sfetcopoulos focuses on student engagement through implementation of Universal Design for Learning for improved academic achievement—specifically, year 4 writing. However, she suggests that "*drawing on students' funds of knowledge, strengths, and interests during teaching and learning*" (p. 61) is effective. She then goes on to encourage professional learning as a way of meeting student needs.

To draw on funds of knowledge, Universal Design for Learning also implicitly relies on understanding the contextual, or place-based, needs of diverse students. In this way the strengths of community are reflected in teaching and learning practice. Perhaps 'universal design'—which to us implies one size fits all approaches—is a misnomer. "*The main objective of UDL is to provide equal educational opportunities by encouraging teachers to offer representation, expression, and engagement for all diverse student*" (Almeqdad et al., 2023, p. 3).

Sfetcopoulos argues that: "*these findings implicate the importance of providing differentiated learning opportunities based on students' individual learning needs and academic abilities in a regional education context*" (p. 60). We would argue that while this sounds good from a pedagogical perspective, the weakness of Universal Design for Learning is that it does not explicitly allow for context, place, or Country in First Nations contexts, to inform pedagogy. We would further argue that without place, engagement is divorced from a student's ontological understanding of reality. As we mentioned earlier, some teachers have an 'extroverted sense of place' (Massey, 1994).

Ben Archer's article about academic support and teacher-student relationships in faith-based schools primarily focuses on benefits that accrue to students, particularly in regional areas. As we noted earlier, the combination of relationships, place consciousness, community development and pedagogical practice are all intertwined. In this context, Archer concludes incidentally that relationships between teachers and students have a strong impact in the broader community.

> *The relationships between teachers and students in regional settings frequently transcend traditional classroom boundaries, extending into sporting activities, community events, and informal interactions within the broader community context. (p.76)*

Of course, he is right! But too often schools are narrowly defined as institutions which produce academic outcomes for students, who become economically productive citizens.

The first Rural Connections by Kalie Ashenden and Rhys Millington draws attention again to workforce shortages, this time in the health sector. Regional university hubs have been around since 2018 and work on the assumption that accessible tertiary education was a key factor in addressing low participation rates in higher education programs, while at the same time providing much needed skills for the regional workforce, and the evidence we have seen in articles published in this Journal (Jaggi et al., 2024), and others (Davis & Taylor, 2019; Stone et al., 2022) is that they do make a difference for several reasons.

Study hubs illustrate the nexus between rural education and community development through development of human and economic capita. Communities benefit economically from students who fill skills gaps, and individuals benefit from access to support to gain qualifications. The authors of this article argue that:

> *Local partnerships are central to effectiveness. Uni Hub actively works with local health networks and health service providers. The conversion rate from university to regional employment as registered nurses or social workers to date is 100%. (p. 87)*

In the second Rural Connections article, Cate Wuttke and Kalie Ashenden focus on careers advice and engagement with schools in the Eyre Peninsula region of South Australia. As with Ashenden and Millington's paper, this paper positions rural education as a benefit for the community, facilitated through collaborative partnerships. This paper also argues that rural education creates human and economic capital benefits for individual students:

> In collaboration with university and industry partners, it aims to facilitate alternative entry pathways, micro-credentials, and skill sets tailored for professional and technical careers that are in-demand locally. These initiatives will give individuals with practical job-ready skills and facilitate access to university. (p. 94)

Sue Barry and Hannah Samson's article is the third and final Rural Connections article and is about the Spencer Gulf Study Hub. This article also addresses the key issue of skills shortages—in this case it is in the context of early childhood services in the remote mining community of Roxby Downs. Again, we see a combination of factors coming together (facilitation, collaboration, resourcing) to produce benefits (addressing workforce shortages, early childhood learning) in the community.

> Uni Hub's facilitation of this project, building a mutually beneficial collaboration with BHP, the Centre, and CQUniversity, has led to increased early childhood education places in Roxby Downs, benefitting children and their parents while simultaneously addressing critical workforce needs. (p. 102)

The focus of the three set of practice articles from Uni Hub colleagues is on building community capacity or 'empowering' regional communities using place-based and collaborative approaches. We see a recurring theme about what rural education can do for communities. This contrasts with the earlier articles which are more about what communities can do for schools, and how communities can work to make rural teaching more attractive to individual teachers. The contrast could be described as the difference between building a local workforce and importing a workforce.

John Halsey's book review of *Rural School Improvement in Developing Countries* looks at rural community development from a macro (country) perspective. In the case studies presented in the book, 'school improvement' is the vehicle for development. In other words, focus on getting rural education right and you will get community development right.

Halsey concludes with this pertinent comment:

> Given how central teachers and educational leaders are to driving and sustaining the desired changes, attracting and then retaining the best educators to the most demanding and challenging locations must be a top priority The challenge continues to be pertinent for education in rural, regional and remote locations, not just in the nominated case studies, but universally. (p. 107)

This comment is echoed in several of the articles in this issue. Educators in rural locations (early years, primary, secondary, and tertiary) are in demand! The focus on workforce shortages no doubt drives initiatives in Australia (like the Rural Study Hubs), but we cannot afford to lose sight of the other pressing needs of many rural and remote communities, related to social cohesion, health and wellbeing, and sustainability.

Concluding thoughts

At a first glance, this issue contains an eclectic set of articles. However, as we read the articles, there are threads that hold them together. We see how critical workforce shortages are driving responses in programs to attract and retain teachers. Without a sustained effort to build rural and remote workforce capacity, communities will suffer, and in turn students will miss out on

opportunities. Schools and post-compulsory years educational providers play a key role in rural community development.

A second thread that holds this issue together is the theme of education-community partnerships. The significance of relationships between teachers and students, between schools and communities, and between universities and local industries is strongly reflected in the evidence presented in this issue. Those relationships are critical for creating opportunities for training, career development and for social cohesion in rural communities.

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Finding Their Place: How Teachers Can Become Part of Their Rural Communities

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Abstract

The tyranny of distance is often perceived as the greatest challenge for teacher retention in rural and remote schools in Australia. Perhaps more accurately, it is the tyranny of placelessness. In this paper, we explore the role of place-connectedness and racial literacy in shaping the interactions of 21 primary and secondary teachers with the social space and place of one Western Australian remote town. Data were collected through interviews and focus groups and analysed with an emergent approach. We propose three levels of place-consciousness to describe the depth of awareness, skill and integration with which a teacher might connect to place and space: place-connectedness, place-willingness, and place-ignorance. We suggest that teachers who are place-connected, considering themselves not just geographically situated in a place but intrinsically connected to the people and culture of that place, are far more likely to achieve a sense of fulfilment and commitment in their roles as rural educators. These teachers value the capital within rural communities, move beyond the teacher social space to the community social space, and respectfully respond to Indigenous space and place. From our exploration, we make recommendations for the conscientisation of place in Initial Teacher Education and graduate teacher induction.

Keywords: *rural education, place-connectedness, place-consciousness, teacher retention, initial teacher education, Indigenous education*

Introduction

Much has been written about the policy and educational challenges of low teacher retention in regional, remote and rural schools (Department of Education, 2022; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; White et al., 2011). High turnover of teachers inhibits student learning (Halsey, 2018) and leads to high resource expenditure at the system and local school level. Regional and remote schools need teachers who will stay longer, who have the motivation and skills necessary to become part of these communities, and who are eager to connect to rural social space and place.

There is an interplay between teachers' dispositions and life experiences, their professional learning, and the support offered in-situ, all of which affect resilience and retention in remote and rural schools (Department of Education, 2022, 2023; Halsey, 2018; Roberts et al., 2022). Complex considerations, such as professional advancement, housing and logistical issues, personal attributes and the isolation inherent in geographic remoteness, affect the feasibility of rural life for some teachers (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Some remote locations can present new challenges to White teachers who may be unfamiliar with navigating social spaces where they are in the racial minority (Macdonald, Booth, et al., 2023; Schulz, 2017). In addition, some remote locations present a myriad of social challenges, such as high rates of alcoholism, violence and social tension (Carrington et al., 2010; James et al., 2021; Leyton-Flor & Sangha, 2024).

The difficulty of attracting and retaining high quality teachers in rural, remote and regional schools is recognised as a significant contributing factor to differences in student performance between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools in Australia (Anderson et al., 2024). Since the pool of teachers available to move to geographically isolated schools is small, scholars and policymakers have argued that attraction and retention policy should target those who are most likely to thrive, while Initial Teacher Education should better prepare teachers for rural success, in order to reduce the resource drain on those schools (Department of Education, 2023; Halsey, 2018; Roberts et al., 2022; Willis & Grainger, 2020).

Almost one-third of Australian teachers work in regional, rural and remote schools, educating almost one-third of all Australian students (Department of Education, 2023; Halsey, 2018). The role of a teacher in a remote and rural setting can be markedly different to the role in urban centres (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015); yet neither the accreditation and policy space nor the majority of Australian Initial Teacher Education programs provides any compulsory preparation for remote, rural and regional schools (Department of Education, 2022; Guenther et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2022). It is not surprising then that Downes and Roberts' (2018) systematic review of staffing in rural and remote schools found that teachers reported challenges, such as *"adapting to rurality, both in a professional and personal context,"* experiencing *"feelings of professional and personal"* isolation, *"managing their 'visibility' within the community,"* and coping with *"difficulties living so close to other staff members"* (p. 32). Such challenges indicate the poor preparedness of many teachers trying to integrate into the rural social space. Such integration involves genuinely connecting to the local community in a reciprocal manner as a member of the community beyond the classroom walls (Willis & Grainger, 2020).

Rural communities offer social and environmental capital not readily available in urban environments (Christie, 2006; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Within recent research, there is a thread of scholarship which focuses on place-consciousness and positive experiences of the rural social space as solutions to the issue of teacher preparation for, and retention in, these communities (Green & Reid, 2021; McCallum & Hazel, 2016; Thiele et al., 2023; White et al., 2011). The works of these scholars weave together thinking from Bourdieusian social theory (e.g., Green & Reid, 2021), Paulo Freire's conscientisation and praxis principles (e.g., Amazan et al., 2023), and Indigenous relationality to Country (e.g., Christie, 2006) to propose strong philosophical foundations from which to develop Initial Teacher Education programs for rural schools.

Continuing these theoretical frameworks (and recognising their limitations of agreement with one another), we explore the role of *place-connectedness* in shaping the way 21 primary and secondary teachers interact with the social space of one Western Australian remote town. We examine how teachers who view themselves as not just geographically situated in a place but connected to the people and culture of that place, are far more likely to achieve a sense of fulfilment and commitment to their roles as rural educators. From our exploration, we make recommendations for the conscientisation of place in Initial Teacher Education and graduate teacher induction.

The Context of Remote, Rural and Regional Schools

The meaning of the terms *remote* and *regional* is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) using statistical markers such as population size, distance to other population centres, and infrastructure. However, within these markers, the experiential context of place and space can be lost. The town of our case study is defined as remote according to statistical measures, but in keeping with a place-centred approach, we prefer Christie's (2006) experiential definition of *remote* communities as those which:

1. have small populations and "*relatively integrated social structures. … Teachers and students in our smaller communities need to learn to get along with each other inside and outside school*";
2. are a long distance from other communities: "*This means that the people close by have a special significance, and people from far away have a special effect*";
3. are "*more conscious of the landscape than we would be living in a big city … we need to address our dependency upon the environment, and above all, to develop a more reflexive relationship to it for environmental as well as educational reasons.*" (p. 31)

In Australia, approximately 80,000 students attend approximately 600 schools in remote communities (Halsey, 2018). These communities can be hundreds or even thousands of kilometres from major population centres. Remote and rural centres have different types of economic opportunities in comparison with large cities, such as limited access to IT infrastructure, and often greater challenges for providing adequate housing, childcare and health services for residents (Guenther, 2021; Halsey, 2018). Some remote and rural centres also experience escalated rates of substance abuse, violence and suicide, resulting from both the socio-ecological impacts of large-scale mining and the frontier violence and cultural dispossession still shaping social relations in these towns (Carrington et al., 2010; James et al., 2021; Leyton-Flor & Sangha, 2024).

In remote and rural Australian schools, a high proportion of students are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We use the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal throughout this paper, and we recognise that preferred terminology varies across Australia. Often these students are deeply connected to place through spiritual, social and environmental knowledge, speak multiple languages other than Standard Australian English, and find their significant cultural knowledge ignored within schools and trampled upon by industry (Christie, 2006; Halsey, 2018; Leyton-Flor & Sangha, 2024). In contrast, many teachers are White, monolingual and non-Indigenous (Australian Department of Education, 2022) and without the requisite level of racial literacy to deliver culturally responsive schooling (Halsey, 2018; Macdonald, Booth, et al., 2024; Schulz, 2017). Teacher ignorance of cultural and racial literacies related to classroom management, parent-teacher relationships, and curricula and pedagogies, and the relevant social, historic and linguistic contexts often results in reinforcing the systemic inequities experienced by Aboriginal students (Anderson et al., 2024; Australian Department of Education, 2022, 2023; Halsey, 2018; Schulz, 2017).

Motivations and Incentives toward Rural and Remote Teaching

Over the past two decades, governments have approached the issue of staffing rural and remote schools through various strategies. These have included financial and career incentives to attract teachers, regional practicums for pre-service teachers, and application processes that sift for suitability for remote settings (Downes & Roberts, 2018; McPherson et al., 2024). Regardless of future policies, if those teachers who take up remote and rural teaching are not motivated to integrate with the local community or are not conscious of the way rurality informs contextually relevant schooling, the educational cost to rural communities remains high.

Approximately one-quarter of Initial Teacher Education graduates are from regional, rural or remote locations themselves (Australian Department of Education, 2022), but one-third of teachers will be required to work in regional, rural or remote locations (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2021; Roberts et al., 2022). Although incentives which increase the attractiveness of rural teaching hold promise (Australian Department of Education, 2022), there is a strong demographic argument that urban-based Initial Teacher Education programs should deliver explicit preparation for rural and remote teaching (Roberts et al., 2022).

Schulz's (2017) examination of White teachers who intentionally seek out the remote Australian desert found that many exhibited signs of "*missionary, mercenary and misfit*" and tourist identities (p. 211). This study of remote schooling does not perhaps cover the complexity of all regional, rural and remote staffing; however, it provides some useful understandings of the role of racial literacy in teacher-preparedness for these settings. In particular, where teacher identities are ignorant of racialised power-relations and "*largely devoid of a critical outlook*" (p. 217), there is little incentive for teachers to understand or integrate into the rural social space. Racially-literate teachers acknowledge the historical legacy of Black/White separateness and the established barriers to Black/White social connection, understandings that can make them outsiders within White teacher communities (Macdonald, Booth, et al., 2023; Schulz, 2017). Such racial conscience is an essential aspect of place-consciousness and place-connectedness.

Place and Place-Consciousness

Indigenous philosopher Mary Graham (2014) wrote:

> There is no Aboriginal equivalent to the Cartesian notion of "I think therefore I am" but, if there were, it would be – I am located therefore I am. Place, being, belonging and connectedness all arise out of a locality in Land. (p. 18)

The understanding of place within place-conscious education goes beyond geography, ecology and pedagogy, and incorporates historical, sociological and cultural contexts. Place brings its own ethics, accountabilities and relationalities, which inform our identities, actions and interactions (Thornton et al., 2021). As Christie (2006) stated in his discussion of schooling in remote Aboriginal communities, "*There is something in the Aboriginal imagination which always has, always will link a good quality education to place, and to place consciousness*" (p. 29).

Consciousness is a continuum, rather than a single state. White and Reid (2008) explained:

> As teachers come to know, and know about, a particular rural place, and come to understand its relationships to, and with other places, they are developing knowledge, sensitivities, awareness, skills, attitudes, and abilities that will allow them to feel more at home and more powerful in a rural setting. (p. 6)

In this paper, we propose three levels of place-consciousness which describe the depth of awareness, skill and integration with which a teacher might connect to place (see Figure 1). The highest level fits Graham's (2014) description (see above): place-connectedness arising from belonging to place. Place-connectedness informs identity at the deepest level and shapes all interactions. Inherent within place-connectedness is a sense that one has past, present and future in this place.

We propose a second level of place-consciousness which we describe as *place-willingness*. Teachers who are place-willing have not had time, or may not yet have the skills, to develop the strength of integration inherent in place-connectedness, but they willingly seeking out connection with their rural place and social space. Such teachers demonstrate reflexivity and are developing rural and racial literacy.

Figure 1: *Three Levels of Place-Consciousness*

Place-Connected	*Place-Willing*	*Place-Ignorant*
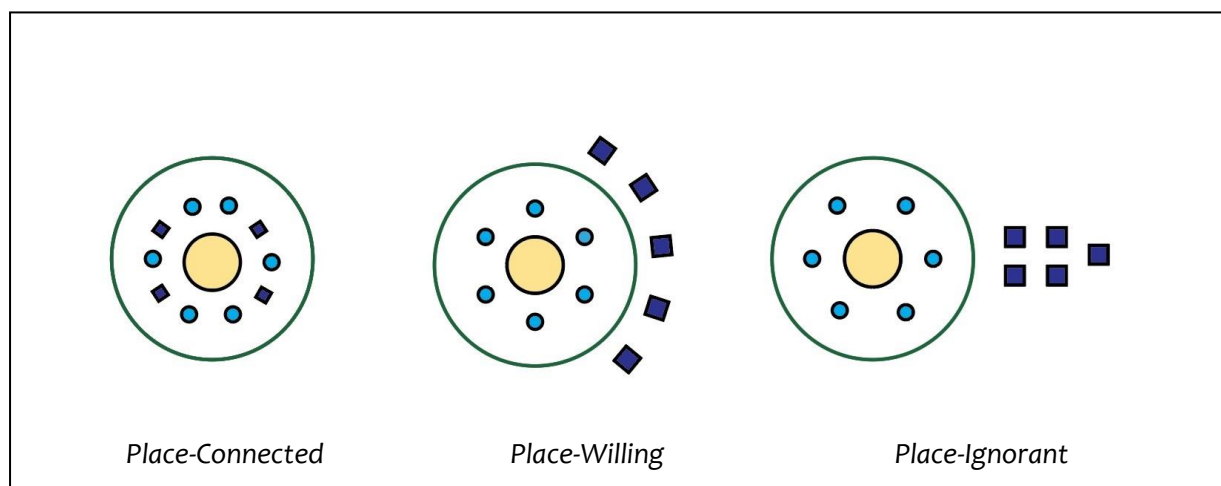
Finally, we describe as *place-ignorant* those who understand a town's space and place at only a superficial level. Such teachers, like Schulz's (2017) tourist and Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist's (2004) mercenary, do not turn their focus to developing belonging within the community's place and social space. These teachers see themselves as from somewhere else and heading to somewhere else.

In the present paper, we focus on teacher praxis that recognises the shared inhabitation of social, cultural and geographical space through a place-connected identity. This may include involvement in sports and social clubs, seeking understanding of Indigenous cultures, linguistic contexts and Country, and developing cross-cultural community relationships and supports. Place-connectedness does more than enable place-responsive curriculum, it engenders social trust, shared norms and contextualised knowledge, which are the basis of real learning (Halsey, 2018).

Place-connectedness is not specific to rural education, but we discuss here its promise for improved education realities in rural schools. In his *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, Halsey (2018) argued that an understanding of place was an essential antidote to the oft-held attitude that *"schooling in a rural context is about 'learning for leaving'"* (p. 21). School teachers who have a solid connection to the local economic, geographic and cultural space will have the necessary capital to assist students to build meaningful connection to place in all its economic and social realities and, in so doing, may improve school engagement, attendance and post-school transitions (Guenther et al., 2024; Halsey, 2018).

Methods

This qualitative study arose out of a desire to better understand the interactions with social space and place which affected teachers' belonging and retention in one remote town. The methodological framework was informed by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and Bourdieu's social space (Hardy, 2012), which provided bases for examining the symbolic meaning behind social interaction and the capital required for these interactions. An interpretive approach to narrative analysis allowed the researchers to explore the participants' own stories and understandings of their experiences through an inductive approach founded in the methodological framework (O'Donoghue, 2007).

The research was motivated by one key educator in a remote Western Australian town who wished to improve teacher retention rates for the benefit of the community. A snowball sampling technique was applied to find teacher participants who worked at primary and

secondary schools within the town. In total, 20 teachers and one pre-service teacher, from both government and non-government schools, participated in this study.

Participants represented the continuum of experience and teaching roles, including early childhood, primary and secondary teachers, relief teachers, part-time and job-sharing teachers, and full-time classroom teachers. Only three participants had more than 10 years' experience, with one of these having taught for over 20 years. One participant was Indigenous, and all others but two were White. One participant held a school leadership position (deputy principal). Over half of the participants had previously taught in other regional or remote towns, four had taught internationally, two had taught in remote Aboriginal communities, and two had taught in juvenile detention centres. Three had become teachers as mature-age entrants.

Following ethics clearance from the University, participants took part in 11 focus group and individual interviews, conducted by two members of the research team. Informed, active consent was obtained from all participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during teachers' own time in neutral (non-school) locations, to allow participants the opportunity to speak freely. Participants were provided scope to speak broadly about the factors they felt affected teacher belongingness and teacher retention. All participants have been given pseudonyms for this article.

The research questions of relevance to the present article are:

1. What brought you to [this town] and what opportunities are there for teachers in [this town]?
2. What are some of the drawbacks and support structures available for teachers in this town?
3. What are some of the factors that you have seen influence the retention of teachers in this town?

Data were transcribed and analysed using NVivo R1.6, after which a thematic narrative analysis was applied, involving multiple readings of interview transcripts to understand the underlying relationship to place of participants. An emergent method was used to generate themes and sub-themes, by grouping data around nodes or categories following methods described by Miles et al. (2014) to ensure reliability and validity of analysis. A framework matrix was produced using NVivo R1.6, and themes were again explored and, at times, combined where they fitted within an overarching narrative.

Three Aspects of Place-Connectedness

Our analysis of teacher narratives explored three ways in which teachers who had established a sense of belonging in their remote location demonstrated place-connectedness:

- Rural consciousness
- Integrating into the community social space
- Respecting and responding to Indigenous social space

Rural Consciousness

Downes and Roberts (2018) concluded that most challenges faced by teachers in rural, regional and remote schools arose from teachers struggling to adapt to life in small or geographically isolated communities. Thus, it is no surprise that those respondents in our study who did have previous experience in regional or small communities demonstrated understanding and appreciation of the social capital present within such spaces. These teachers demonstrated a level of place-consciousness that was at least place-willing, if not more. One participant, Helen, exemplified this approach:

> *I grew up in the country, and then I went to boarding school and did my teaching degree in Adelaide, so in the city. And I was, like, I don't know if I'm a country girl or a city girl*

anymore. But I realised after experiencing that, yeah, I love the country, and I love [this town], how friendly it is.

The protective benefit on teacher wellbeing of place-willingness was evident, even if the geographic and cultural context of previous rural experience was vastly different. Such was the experience of Larissa:

I grew up in Ireland, so obviously it's cold and whatnot ... I think it's maybe worth mentioning, my perspective on everything is very positive because, well, where I'm from is smaller than [here]. So for me, ... being here is very similar to how I grew up. So I find that really comforting ... There's [so much] here for young families and children. I think it's unknown [how much] is available in these regional areas, because there is a lot. My husband plays water polo and, his friends and our family in Ireland think it is the funniest thing!

Such willingness to enjoy and connect to the essence of regional or remote space is an essential entry-point to thriving, as it provides protection against the culture shock and isolation that are obstacles for so many teachers who move to these settings (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2004). A number of state and territory governments have programs in place to incentivise graduate teachers to apply for rural schools in their professional service through building their sense of competence and connection to rurality during pre-service teacher placement (Australian Government, 2024).

Although Downes and Roberts (2018) cautioned that rural Initial Teacher Education placements are not empirically proven to improve rural place-consciousness, a Queensland study by Thiele et al. (2023) provided an example of school leaders intentionally, and successfully, fostering rural place-willingness as part of the practicum experience. Hence, teacher retention in rural schools may well improve if Initial Teacher Education programs develop in graduates a strengths-based understanding of the social and cultural capital in remote and regional communities, by providing positive exposure to rural classrooms through theoretical learning, ICT and practicums (Australian Department of Education, 2022; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; White et al., 2011).

An attitude of place-willingness will not always result in teachers enjoying, or thriving, in remote and regional contexts, and hence will not always result in place-connectedness. Family and cultural ties, lifestyle desires, social realities and personal interests simply mean that some teachers find their sense of belonging in other contexts. As Ada said:

Regional life isn't for everybody though. I've had two really good friends that have just said ... This is just not for me. Don't like the heat. I don't like the camping; I don't like the fishing. ... sometimes you can move somewhere and it's just not your thing either. And it's not that you've done anything wrong, and I think it's very important to accept that sometimes.

Forcing the retention of teachers who are truly struggling to integrate into the rural space is unlikely to yield dividends (Willis & Grainger, 2020). Yet, support for integration into a new community can be highly valuable (Gray et al., in press) as a means to increasing teachers' wellbeing.

Integrating into the Community Social Space

Within our study, participants located themselves as either within or separate to the social space of the town they lived in. Although almost all shared a sense of contentment within their rural life, respondents formed two distinct groups: those whose belongingness was limited to other teachers, and those whose belongingness extended to the broader community.

Those teachers who had actively sought out other teachers to create their social space displayed elements of place-ignorance, in that they did not view their rural teaching location as home. Particularly for young or inexperienced teachers, there can be much to gain in establishing social

networks with other professionals who can provide support with the emotional and mental load of culture shock, isolation, and sometimes difficult teaching contexts (Gray et al., in press; McPherson et al., 2024). Yet, although the teacher social space can engender a strong sense of temporal belonging and wellbeing, it may not lead to teacher retention in the rural teaching location over the longer term. Further, it can provide teachers the opportunity to socialise in a homogenously White setting which, as a later anecdote shows, is detrimental to the development of true belongingness and cultural responsiveness in communities of a mixed racial demographic.

Examples of this place-ignorance are found in the following words from Cameron:

> *I think I'm a traveller at heart, … I suppose I've come from a family where my father was in the Navy, so we moved every two years, or thereabouts. … It doesn't worry me to move, and I suppose jumping outside of my comfort zone, because teaching wasn't my first career … So then it was only when I had kids, and I thought, oh, who's gonna look after them on the holidays? I'd better do education. So, you know, it hasn't fazed me to change because that's who I am anyway.*

Connectedness to local community is important not just for teachers' own belonging, but because it enables teachers to build the community's trust by demonstrating their commitment to place. In his review, Halsey (2018) commented:

> *Trust between and among those associated with a school … needs to be constantly attended to. This is especially the case in small population centres "where everyone knows everyone else" … Creating opportunities to build school, family and community relationships are very important to improving the core business of a school – teaching and learning. (p. 29)*

One of our participants, Soraya, demonstrated how place-willingness could yet become the catalyst for genuine place-connectedness, given enough time to establish a real depth of connection. She explained:

> *That's why I wanted to do this … I actually had a job overseas lined up, you know, I wanted to be somewhere completely culturally different, and this has totally been culturally different in all aspects of that … So I think I knew what I was getting myself into in that sense, but I think coming up here, the best thing that I have done, is saying yes to everything, and literally, like, I signed up for Fair Game, which is a volunteer organisation, footy, getting into local sports. We do tutoring, Follow the Dream.*

In contrast with the narratives provided, teachers who had intentionally integrated into the community social space over longer periods of time demonstrated a place-connectedness which clearly supported a deeper level of wellbeing and contributed to their ongoing retention as rural teachers. John explained: "*So pretty much this is home. I've joined all the sporting committees over the years, I've been on council, I'm a volunteer [paramedic] so I'm entrenched in the community now.*"

Another participant, Narelle, provided this account of the sense of belonging entwined in place-connectedness:

> *My family is the family I've chosen here, and these kids become so much of you, and the community and the families and … I just love it. …There's that sense of belonging again, like, they know we're still [living here]. Even though we're their primary school teachers, the amount that come back or in the shops, "Hi, Miss," … big 21-year-olds still give you a hug and they're calling my baby their sister and [saying], "I knew you'd be a good mum." Like, it just makes you feel proud that, okay, I've done something right.*

This place-connectedness takes time because it is established through deep relationships. Place-connected teachers defined themselves by their place within the rural community (Christie, 2006) and demonstrated the respect for rural social capital which is necessary for sustainable teacher retention (Hazel & McCallum, 2016).

Finally, there is an interaction between place-belongingness and racial literacy which is essential to building deep positive relationships in remote Australian communities. Schulz (2017) explained that teachers who exhibited minimal connectedness to community held *"little understanding of race relations or of the region to which they travel. … Still learning to teach, this tourist teacher will often attempt to assuage feelings of anxiety by socialising almost exclusively with other whites"* (p. 212). One anecdote from group interviews which we share below served to demonstrate this point.

In our interviews, Sally, a participant of African heritage, sat in a group with White teachers, quietly observing the others as they happily discussed the recreational opportunities concurrent with mining town life. Then she stepped in.

> *My experience has been different. I think the word that sums it up would be … loneliness. I find [this town] to be a very, very lonely place. … But then I've never lived in a small town before. I've always been a person who's lived in cities. I've never camped in my whole life, I don't know how to fish. So I'm kind of coming to this small town where like, okay, everything that everyone enjoys I have never experienced before.*

Sally went on to discuss her difficulties: first year of married life, first year of running a household, first year of teaching, first year living a long distance from home. There was no community for her, she said, and no invitations to social events; just a hard lonely slog learning how to run her own classroom in a foreign place. After she finished speaking, other participants immediately responded with the suggestion that Sally just had not tried hard enough. Rather than expressing support for her in a vulnerable moment, or recognising their own role in the cultural power dynamics which made belonging to the teacher social space so much easier for those who were White (Australian Department of Education, 2022; Green & Reid, 2021), the other respondents closed ranks to demonstrate to the interviewer that Sally's experiences were of her own making.

For Sally, neither the town nor the teacher social space had engendered belonging. Yet concerningly, the greatest obstacle to Sally's place-connectedness was the racial ignorance of other teachers. In her experience, the teacher social space was used to enforce conformity and became a source of social exclusion. Unfortunately, this may be more common than current research evidentiates. Submissions to the *Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* (Australian Department of Education, 2022) highlighted that *"the lack of existing diversity in the teaching workforce can be a deterrent for future diversity, as potential teachers from diverse backgrounds may not feel they will be welcomed and valued in the workplace"* (p. 14).

We juxtapose Sally's anecdote with research by White and colleagues (2011) into the retention of beginning teachers:

> *One of the more memorable quotes from an experienced teacher highlighting the school's investment in a beginning teacher was when she simply stated —"When you come here you come with your whole self." In further unpacking this statement, it was revealed that this view was collectively shared by each and every staff member, and to them it meant that as a teacher, it is worth investing in knowing the whole person, their family and background and their skills and strengths. It emerged as a significant factor in particularly retaining this newly qualified teacher, who could have been at the risk of feeling very marginalised or pressured to behave in culturally stereotypical and gendered ways. (p. 74)*

Initial Teacher Education programs which focus on building pre-service teachers' capacity to work across the multicultural spectrum of students, may need to broaden this approach to

understanding multicultural collegiate relationships also. If teachers cannot recognise racial power-relations and create a safe cultural space for colleagues of different ethnicities, it seems unlikely they would be able to do so for the communities they serve.

Respecting and Responding to Indigenous Social Space

The concepts of racial literacy and belonging to the social space of the community were intertwined in participants' responses to the racialised social space within the town, whose population was about 50% Indigenous Australian (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Cultural responsiveness goes beyond school-based interactions and includes intentionally and respectfully connecting to Indigenous social space and place in the local community. A common thread amongst participants who demonstrated place-connectedness was their initiative in relinquishing the racialised power of the authoritative White teacher in the schoolground and embracing instead their identity as guest in an Indigenous community.

Narelle stated:

> *I would never call up a parent in [remote community] and be, like, "Your kid misbehaved today, you've got to come in and have a parent meeting." Largely because there's no phone service [laughs] but, if the kid had a really bad day, or I was really worried about them … I would take them home, and I would meet with the parent, like, go into their house and have a coffee and chat to mum and dad or nana, or whoever it was. And you just had a really good relationship with those families. And what a difference it would make if, at the start of every year, we spent a week doing home visits with every child in our classes, parents and their families and go into their home and meeting them and understanding the context of [their lives].*

Christie (2006) stated in his discussion of remote Aboriginal communities that "*social capital is generated and deployed in our communities, in ways quite different from the [urban] centre, and we need to nurture these opportunities*" (p. 31). Narelle demonstrated a deep understanding of place throughout her interview, providing narratives of how she had actively investigated ways to respectfully connect to Indigenous community social space. Doing so required a critical consciousness of racialised social spaces in Australia (Green & Reid, 2022; Schulz, 2017). Narelle went on to explain:

> *The first time I ever went to a funeral, it was one of my student's mothers … and I said, "I want to go to support him. How do I do this? Like, what is expected because I'm … potentially the only White person at this funeral? What do I do?" And they were telling me, "Okay, you wear black and white and when you go up, you shake the hand, bow your head, and then that's it, that's all you have to say, you don't say or do anything else and then just stand back." And they said, that will be noted, everybody will notice. But you're gaining respect by doing it.*

> *It's just like any real friendships; it takes time to develop. … And then it's a case of, I suppose, you know, at sporting events, sometimes the Aboriginal families will sit differently to where we are, so I'd always make a point of going around and having a yarn with them. But I would always walk around and talk to anybody and everybody. So it wasn't like I was just pinpointing them for the sake, because they can see me, that I was wandering, and talking to everybody … So it just takes time. But you've just got to show that you're in it for the right reasons … I do really want to know, how you are, what you're doing, how can I include your culture into my class.*

In contrast, the ill-preparedness of some participants for working within, or even recognising their arrival in, an Aboriginal space was highly evident. Although the town had a sizeable Aboriginal population, some participants worked at one school which had a very low population of Aboriginal students. Participants from this school demonstrated minimal knowledge of

Aboriginal culture, local community, language, or Country, beyond the limited training they had received. Furthermore, they perceived the knowledge irrelevant because their own students were not Aboriginal. Casey stated:

> *The training that I've had hasn't been that great. It's sort of, here's the Cultural Framework, you know, we'll go through it. Where do you think we are [on the Framework]? It's not embedded, that's for sure. Again [our school] doesn't do it very well because … it's not that there's a need.*

This attitude reveals the respondent's place-ignorance, through her belief that Indigenous social space and Indigenous place existed in a separate reality to her own—a duality that would not be possible within a place-connected ontology. It belies the reality that cultural literacy is a necessary requisite for all young people if they are to engage positively in the social space of a town of mixed racial demographic, where local Indigenous ecological, historical and social knowledges hold curricular relevance to all students. At the policy level, it is at odds with the Education Council's (2019) *Alice Springs (Mpartnwe) Education Declaration* goal that in all Australian schools *"learning is built on and includes local, regional and national cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples"* (p. 5), with the aim that all students *"possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians"* (p. 8).

In the interviews, participants acknowledged that some online cultural training was available and mandated; yet it became apparent that the little professional development these teachers had received was too generic to engender a place-conscious cultural responsiveness. Such place-specific learning might include family connections, language groups, knowledge of local Country, and Indigenous language curriculum resources, enabling teachers to build a more authentically place-conscious classroom (Lester et al., 2013). This kind of professional development cannot be delivered in an Initial Teacher Education course located hundreds or thousands of kilometres away, and it remains the remit of local school and community leaders, supported by sector- and government-level resourcing. In saying this, we do not negate the need for Initial Teacher Education courses to prepare teachers who are racially literate and knowledgeable of Indigenous cultures and histories in Australia, as this knowledge is a necessary foundation for localised induction programs to build on. Our previous work has shown that effective cultural responsiveness training in Initial Teacher Education greatly enhances the willingness and confidence of teachers to work with Indigenous peoples and knowledges in their future careers (Macdonald et al., 2024; Macdonald, Gringart, et al., 2023). Even so, localised induction is critical to place-conscientisation.

Willis and Grainger (2020) pointed out that where school systems rely solely on teachers' initiative to obtain cultural professional learning, they are under-serving remote and Indigenous communities. Narelle shared her frustration that in some schools in town there was no sense of connection with the Indigenous community:

> *If you're just wanting [Indigenous community members] to come to read a story, and then you don't see from them for another year till NAIDOC Week rocks around … I think that's appalling. I'm actually having that discussion at [school], because it's now the end of the year concerts and they want me to get my [Aboriginal student group] up to do the Acknowledgement to Country, so I'm, like, "They're not a shiny toy that you bring out on display." I said, "Acknowledgement to Country should be taught in every single classroom, by everybody, and it's not just for the Aboriginal kids to have to do it."*

In small communities of mixed racial demographic, teachers, school leaders and schools who remain wilfully ignorant of local Indigenous cultures will likely experience ramifications on their

ability to build social trust and to engender the real learning behind metrics such as absenteeism and achievement.

Recommendations and Cautions

This research acknowledges the teachers who are thriving in rural and remote towns because they are connected to place and to social space. Yet, it is not enough to say "Let teachers be place-conscious," and it will be so. Teachers are products of the broader social conscience and education philosophy within which they themselves have been socialised—in Western spaces, a philosophy heavy with humanism (Amazan et al., 2023; Freire, 1974). Initial Teacher Education may begin, or further, the process of place-conscientisation, but systemic change is required for a collective critical conscience of relationality through place (Amazan et al., 2023). For now, we recognise that if connectedness requires praxis, then scholarly work can explore the mechanisms by which this can be achieved.

In this paper, we have aimed to break down the socio-cultural aspects of place-consciousness into smaller parts, exploring teacher narratives that demonstrate meaningful place-connectedness. We suggest that Initial Teacher Education courses could utilise the significant wealth of extant scholarly literature to develop pre-service teachers' understanding of:

- rural social capital;
- community and teacher social spaces and the role of each in teacher wellbeing;
- place-consciousness as a basis for understanding the contexts of students and communities, contexts that may feel local but are also shaped by broader regional and national contexts;
- place-connected curriculum and pedagogy as requisites for quality education in rural and Indigenous communities.

Schools and education bodies could also support teachers for work in remote, rural and regional schools through tailored induction programs that build teachers' capacity to respond to social space and place within specific communities. Aboriginal cultural responsiveness learning which is specific to the location and community should be provided in all schools that service towns with sizeable Aboriginal populations, even if the school has few Aboriginal children enrolled, as the impact on the wider community of ignorant teachers reinforcing racial stereotypes and divisions can be significant. As our data show, there do exist many teachers who inherently value the social and environmental capital in remote and rural centres. These teachers deserve support with childcare, housing, and healthcare where needed.

Conclusion

The tyranny of distance is often perceived as the greatest challenge for teacher retention in regional and remote schools in Australia. Perhaps more accurately, it is the tyranny of placelessness. The majority of teachers who leave an urban life to work in remote schools are leaving behind their support network, their identity and their social field. With this geographical distance comes a new place and space that holds its own capital and currency. Teachers who are able to connect with the incumbent staff and community social space and develop a place-connected identity are able to find belonging for themselves and establish social trust amongst the school community.

The onus is on systems (government policy, Initial Teacher Education, graduate induction, and rural teacher support programs) to increase teachers' capacity to value and contribute effectively to remote and regional experiences. The situation experienced by Sally may well have been different if Initial Teacher Education programs were able to upskill all teachers to understand their role in supporting effective transition to place for others, to critically reflect on socio-

cultural causes of social isolation, and to provide avenues to actively build community as a requisite of teacher wellbeing and retention.

Place-connectedness means that teachers understand that the geographic space for building social capital is not the school-ground, but the community itself. It further requires that teachers understand their own habitus within racialised contexts and the agency required to actively break down normalised barriers between Black and White communities in Australian society. Importantly, though, this positive attitude toward life in small or isolated communities can be learned, and Initial Teacher Education programs which conscientise teachers to place may better equip pre-service teachers for these schools.

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Professional Experience Partnerships in Regional and Remote Schools:
A Pathway to Employment

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Abstract

The shortage of teachers in regional and remote schools remains a pressing problem and has been exacerbated by the current national teacher shortage. The preparedness and willingness of graduate teachers to work in regional and remote areas are central to this problem. Partnerships between professional experience sites, providers of initial teacher education, and education systems are considered key to a successful professional experience placement, combined they can prepare pre-service teachers for future graduate employment. This qualitative study provides insight into the perspectives of professional experience site leaders to understand the benefits and challenges of professional experience and graduate employment in regional and remote schools and how to address these issues. The findings suggest that the benefits and challenges of professional experience and graduate employment in regional and remote schools are complex and shaped by various factors. Mentor teacher availability, limited uptake of placements by pre-service teachers, a limited understanding of regional and remote contexts, specific preparation, and general early-career teacher retention all contribute to the multi-pronged complexity inhibiting regional and remote employment. Benefits such as offering an alternative to a city-centric lifestyle, fast-tracked permanency, and financial incentives have shaped policy with limited success in addressing the teacher workforce crisis. Our findings suggest an alternative approach may benefit the issue of teacher shortage in regional and remote schools. We propose the widespread implementation of successful context-specific instruction as pre-service teachers prepare for professional experience in regional and remote schools as a possible means to address the long-standing regional and remote teacher shortage.

Keywords: *regional schooling, professional experience, partnerships, graduate employment*

Introduction

Over four million (4,042,512) students are enrolled in 9,614 schools Australia-wide (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Of these, over one million (1,103,723) students or 27.3% attend school in regional and remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). More than 4,000 schools are in regional and remote areas of which 84% are identified as government schools (Australian

Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2021). While state and territory governments are responsible for teacher employment and workforce planning in public schools an increase in Australian Government intervention has recently occurred to recruit teachers. The workforce shortage of teachers in regional and remote Australian schools has been a long-standing issue. It has however been exacerbated by the dual complication of a broader national teacher workforce shortage and the impact of COVID-19. Although the impact of COVID-19 on teacher attrition could not be foreseen, the long-standing recognition of the general shortage of teachers in Australia and worldwide has been known and discussed for some time (Howse, 1991; Macdonald, 1999).

It has become apparent that the teacher workforce shortages in regional and remote areas have continued to negatively impact student learning and educational outcomes (Halsey, 2018; Downes & Roberts, 2018). To overcome this discrepancy interventions have been suggested such as fostering partnerships between professional experience sites, providers of initial teacher education, and education systems (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015).

Over the past two decades a variety of approaches to professional experience and graduate employment have been developed in partnership between regional and remote schools and universities. Many of these approaches have been successfully implemented, however they have not been widespread nor sustained (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Trinidad et al., 2014; White & Reid, 2008; White & Kline, 2012). More recently, because of the national teacher workforce shortage, attention has again focused on regional and remote teacher workforce shortages, and education systems have developed a new set of strategies to address this issue. For example, the *Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021-2024* (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021) and the *Country Education Strategy 2021-2028* (Government of South Australia, 2021). The impact of these strategies on professional experience, graduate employment, and retention in regional and remote schools is unknown. Also unknown is the impact the teacher workforce shortages are having on pre-service teachers undertaking professional experience in regional and remote schools, and the effects this may have on prospective graduate employment in regional and remote schools.

To understand the impact of these strategies on professional experience, graduate employment, and the retention of graduates in regional and remote schools, a qualitative study was undertaken in regional schools in New South Wales and South Australia. An analysis of site leaders' perspectives was conducted to understand the ongoing benefits and challenges of professional experience and graduate employment and possible solutions. By doing so, this research contributes to the body of knowledge to help inform what has been described as a *"perennial problem"* (Knipe & Bottrell, 2023, p. 183) of teacher workforce shortages in regional and remote communities and the deleterious effects on the educational outcomes of school students. The research adds to previous successful regional and remote partnership literature evidenced in Australia (Trinidad et al., 2012; Ure et al., 2017; White et al., 2018) and will propose site-based solutions to the teacher workforce shortages in regional and remote communities.

Literature Review

Australia is amid a teacher shortage. Projections estimate that by 2025 the demand for secondary school teachers will exceed the number of graduates by over 4,000 teachers each year (Australian Government, 2022). The identification of a teacher shortage is not new. Almost a decade ago, McKenzie et al., (2013) evidenced that 20% of primary school and 40% of secondary school principals have moderate or major difficulties in filling teaching positions. Already in some Australian states, the annual attrition from the profession is greater than the number of teacher graduates (Australian Government, 2022). While the teacher shortage is a national crisis, the issue is heightened in regional and remote schools. Staffing these schools has been a long-term concern with research consistently indicating schools located further away from major cities face

greater challenges in recruiting and retaining staff (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Burke & Buchanan, 2022).

The complexity of finding and retaining teaching staff is further complicated by factors such as the teacher's level of experience and stage within their career journey. Regional and remote schools are often staffed by early-career teachers who, despite initial financial incentives, tend to leave after a short period of time (Roberts, 2004; Kelly et al., 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019; Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). Research suggests that even when these positions are filled, many of these teachers report feeling unprepared for the unique demands of rural education (Kline et al., 2013) and appear to be at increased risk of anxiety and burnout (Carroll et al., 2022).

Although findings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013) highlighted 10 years ago the plight of rural educative disadvantage, recent data from the Australian Government Department of Education (2022, p. 1) affirms its continued existence. The Government report reveals the "*average 15-year-old from remote Australia is around 1.5 years behind*" in STEM (Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) learning when compared to their metropolitan counterparts. Evidence found in the literature has raised concerns about instigating further Government intervention. The *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* report highlighted the complex challenges of regional and remote teaching and related systemic disadvantages. A key point within the document made note that to lift student outcomes initial teacher education programs have a role to play, especially in the preparation of graduates (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014).

In response to this call, several Australian initial teacher education providers have made significant amendments to their professional experience programs to target regional and remote teaching opportunities. Several universities have offered bursaries or scholarships to support placement expenses and attraction (see Charles Darwin University, 2021; Flinders University, n.d.; The University of Adelaide, n.d. and The University of Newcastle, n.d.). Some of these financial incentives have been supplemented by education systems in each of these states. For example, in South Australia, both Catholic Education (Catholic Education South Australia, 2024) and the Department for Education (Government of South Australia, 2021) have also offered financial and logistical support to final-year pre-service teachers to undertake placement in regional and remote schools.

While financial support has been highlighted as an inhibitor, other issues are also seen as preventing pre-service teachers from being attracted to regional and remote professional experience and employment. Even when opportunities are provided to pre-service teachers to undertake professional experience in regional and remote environments the uptake is limited (Mitchell et al., 2022). Issues such as the type and context of the community, the geographical location, housing availability and expert mentor teacher availability all play a role in attracting pre-service teachers and graduates to regional and remote schools (Roberts et al., 2022; White & Kline, 2012). The *Teacher Education Expert Panel* discussion paper (Australian Government, 2023a) while acknowledging the need to host more pre-service teachers in regional and remote schools highlights the challenges to regional and remote schools and their capacity to mentor pre-service teachers, especially as Downes & Roberts (2018) purport that these schools are generally staffed by a high proportion of early-career teachers. To compound the issue further the geographical isolation faced by pre-service teachers when accessing university support systems inadvertently makes the regional and remote professional experience appear less favourable (as noted by Hudson & Hudson, 2019 and Mitchell et al., 2022).

Despite some viewing regional and remote professional experiences as unfavourable, initial teacher education providers have continued to recognise the importance of preparing pre-service teachers for regional and remote teaching. The *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey, 2018) instigated by the Australian Government responded to the

challenges to improve education access and outcomes for students in regional and remote communities. The report suggested a need to first understand the varied contexts, challenges, and opportunities when selecting pre-service teachers to attend a regional or remote placement during the initial appointment processes and then ensuring ongoing professional support of teachers during the placement (Halsey, 2018). As Halsey contends, the more prepared pre-service teachers are in relation to regional and remote teaching by initial teacher education providers, the less likely early-career attrition.

More recently a Regional Education Commissioner was appointed in response to the recommendations from the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (see Australian Government, 2023b; Napthine et al., 2019 and Halsey, 2018). This appointment offers the opportunity for the Commissioner to be a champion and advocate of regional and remote education. One way to do this is by supporting the readiness of pre-service teachers for teaching by working with initial teacher education partners to provide placements in regional and remote contexts (Kline et al., 2013; Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Increased placements, along with other initiatives, would attract more graduate teachers to schools in those locations. This would help to avert the current regional and remote teacher shortage. As suggested by Hudson & Hudson (2019) one of the most significant ways of addressing teacher shortages is to entice pre-service teachers to these contexts within their teaching programs. To this end, the current study investigated site leaders' perspectives about professional experience placements in their school to answer the research question:

What are site leaders' opinions of the benefits, challenges, and implications of undertaking a placement in regional and remote schools and the consequent impact on regional and remote employment?

Methodology

Participant Selection

The present study collected data from site leaders in regional and remote schools in New South Wales and South Australia that had hosted pre-service teacher placements in partnership with participating initial teacher education providers in New South Wales, South Australia and the Northern Territory between 2018 and 2021. The five participating initial teacher education providers were the University of Canberra, the University of Newcastle, the University of Adelaide, Flinders University, and Charles Darwin University. Site leaders in New South Wales and South Australia schools who liaised with the host universities were invited to participate. Site leaders in Northern Territory partner schools were not invited to participate in this study. Indeed, ethics approval was not granted by their employer due to workload concerns. Site leaders were selected to complete the survey as they liaise directly with initial teacher education providers to support and provide mentoring to pre-service teachers during placement, often providing leadership within school settings. Site leaders are at the forefront of the challenges associated with regional and remote education and have an in-depth understanding and knowledge surrounding future pre-service teacher employment in regional and remote schools.

Data Collection

Contextual, demographic and qualitative data were collected using a Qualtrics survey (https://qualtrics.com). The survey contained a range of background questions along with three open-ended questions requiring a written response (see Figure 1).

Questions 1 and 2, provided information concerning the schools' location. Questions 3, 4 and 5 collected information about the initial teacher education institutions that provided pre-service teachers to regional and remote schools, the number of pre-service teachers hosted by those schools for placement, and the number of pre-service teachers directly employed after the

placement. Five initial teacher education providers supported placements to the 14 regional and remote schools: the University of Canberra, the University of Newcastle, the University of Adelaide, Flinders University and Charles Darwin University (Adelaide Campus). A complete data set to determine the number of pre-service teachers who were hosted for placements and the number of pre-service teachers directly employed after the placement was not collected from all 14 sites.

Responses from questions 6, 7 and 12 highlighted site leaders' opinions of the challenges, benefits and outcomes of hosting pre-service teachers in regional and remote schools, the reasons for these, and how initial teacher education providers can work with their school to address these issues. Three site leaders fully completed these questions, and these data were analysed. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity.

Questions 8, 9, 10, and 11 provided further information regarding the employment of graduate teachers, type of teacher registration, whether the school had any shortage of teaching staff and the number of teacher vacancies they had at the beginning of the teaching year. Responses to these questions were not completed by many participants and the reasons given included the impact of COVID-19 on workloads and difficulty in accessing relevant data. Data were also inconclusive concerning the shortage of teaching staff and the number of teacher vacancies at the commencement of the teaching year.

Figure 1: *Survey Questions*

1. In which regional and remote region is your school located?
2. In which state or territory is your school located?
3. Between 2018-21 which initial teacher education institutions provided pre-service teachers to your school?
4. How many pre-service teacher placements did you host in your school?
5. How many of these pre-service teachers were employed in your school?
6. Between 2018-21 what were some of the challenges, benefits and outcomes of hosting pre-service teachers undertaking education placements?
7. What were some of the reasons for these challenges, benefits and outcomes? (For example, the impact of COVID-19)
8. Have you employed any graduate teachers in your school between 2018-21?
9. If yes, what category was the registration?
10. Is your school facing a teacher shortage?
11. How many teaching positions were vacant in your school at the start of the school year?
12. Can you suggest ways for initial teacher education providers to work with your school to address this issue?

Site leaders were emailed a link to the anonymous survey. Fourteen site leaders partially completed the survey. Five came from New South Wales schools in the regional areas of Queanbeyan, Rural South and West, Southern Highlands, and Yass. Nine were from South Australia schools in the regional areas of Limestone Coast, Lower Southeast and the Riverland. Of these, three site leaders fully completed the survey: one each from Rural and Southwest New South Wales, the Limestone Coast South Australia and the Riverland South Australia. Because pre-service teacher professional experience and graduate employment are shaped by state policy, funding and incentives, the two states in which the site leaders were situated became the focus of this study: New South Wales and South Australia.

Research Approach

This research employed a qualitative approach to uncover site leaders' perceptions of their everyday experiences of hosting preservice teachers for professional experience, along with the implications for graduate employment in their school and community (Miles et al., 2020, p. 21). We analysed the open-ended survey data through the theoretical lens of constructivism. Constructivism posits that reality is constructed by a group of people in their own context as they assign meaning to actions and interactions. Knowledge is local, specific, and subjective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

We analysed the data by following Miles et al.'s (2020) three-step qualitative analysis procedure. First, we undertook initial coding. We assigned In-Vivo codes to label segments of data for further analysis. In-vivo codes include participants' words in the code and *"honour the participant's voice"* (Miles et al., 2020, p. 63). For example, *"mentors (un)available", "availability of mentors in a small school"* and *"availability to take on placement students"*. Second, we undertook pattern coding to reduce the initial codes to fewer, more significant concepts. For example, we grouped the initial In-Vivo codes listed above and assigned the pattern code 'mentor teacher availability'. The pattern code 'mentor teacher availability' is one of the concepts that explain the theme of 'mentor teacher capacity' (see Figure 2). Third, from the summative findings we developed *"assertions"* (Miles et al., 2020, p. 92). For example, developing mentor teacher capacity was identified as a challenge along with pre-service and graduate teacher attraction and retention. No solutions were identified to address the challenge of mentor teacher capacity however context specific preparation for professional experience was identified as solution to address pre-service teacher attraction and retention.

Trustworthiness

We drew on Lincoln & Guba's framework (1985) to put in place measures to ensure trustworthiness. Lincoln & Guba (1985) argue that because social reality is constructed, and there are many conceivable interpretations, the quality of qualitative research is best assessed by considering credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability and authenticity. To establish credibility, two of us analysed and interpreted the data, and we all revised the results, analysis and interpretations. This supported reflexivity, a technique for establishing confirmability through the ongoing discussion of understandings, perspectives and assumptions. Ongoing analysis established dependability and confirmed that our interpretations of the data did not change upon repeated readings. Furthermore, changes to the assignment of pattern codes and themes that occurred during the process of mapping codes and member checking were documented as part of the audit trail, also a technique to establish confirmability. We employed the strategy of methodological documentation to establish transferability by detailing our methodology so others understand its rationale and logic and can determine whether the findings are transferable to other settings and groups. To establish authenticity, we provided verbatim quotes to convey the participants' realities along with figures to demonstrate the logic of our interpretation.

Findings

Theme 1: Mentor Teacher Capacity in Regional and Remote Schools

Theme 1 explains the perceptions of the site leaders from Heritage Heights and Valley Ridge regional schools of the dual challenges of mentor teacher availability and ability and the factors that impacted on this. Informal reciprocal learning was identified by them as a benefit of hosting placements (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Mentor Teacher Capacity in Regional and Remote Schools*
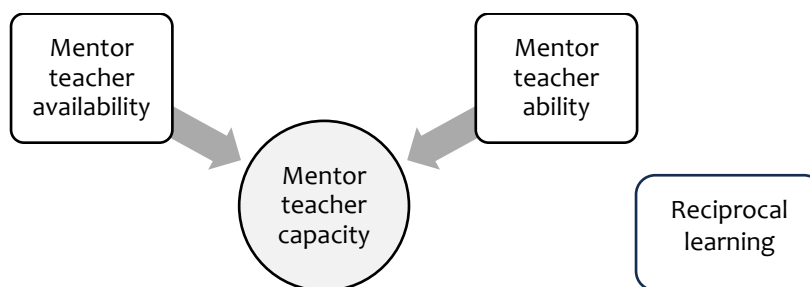
Mentor Teacher Availability and Ability. At Heritage Heights School, the site leader's responses suggest that staffing challenges impacted mentor teacher availability and mentor teacher ability. For example, *"mentors being available (staff shortages, unwillingness, training)"*. It is unclear what caused "*staff shortages*". However given the longstanding teacher shortage in regional and remote schools, this is not surprising. Teacher shortages have an effect teacher's workloads and in turn, 'mentor teacher capacity.' The site leader at Heritage Heights School did not explain why mentor teachers were "*unwilling*" or why "*training*" mentor teachers was a challenge. One explanation could be that the dual challenges of availability and ability impacted mentor teacher capacity and contributed to the unwillingness of teachers to mentor pre-service teachers.

Similarly, the site leader at Valley Ridge School identified a range of factors that contributed to mentor teacher capacity in their school. For example, *"COVID 19 had a massive impact on our staff and availability to take on placement students"* and *"availability of mentors in a small school where staff are already taking on multiple roles".* For this site leader, it appears that mentor teacher availability was also affected by teacher workload. At Valley Ridge School, the challenge of 'mentor teacher availability' appears to be one that many regional schools faced: size and staffing, compounded by COVID 19. Moreover, this site leader stated that they had not faced any staff shortages due to strategies they put in place which were not ideal, "*unfortunately placed staff they weren't quite what we were looking for, but we were desperate.*" This site leader did not explain the impact this had on mentor teacher availability. However, it is possible that hiring less than ideal teachers exacerbated the challenges already faced by the small staff. The challenges of mentor teacher capacity identified by the site leaders at Heritage Heights and Valley Ridge schools differed but were both impacted by school staffing which limited mentor teacher availability. In Heritage Heights School, a lack of mentor teacher training also affected mentor teacher ability. Solutions to address the challenge of mentor teacher ability were not provided by site leaders.

Reciprocal Learning. A benefit of hosting professional experience placements identified by the site leaders at Valley Ridge and Heritage Heights schools was reciprocal learning, a concept that explains informal professional learning between pre-service teachers and teachers. For example, the site leader at Valley Ridge School stated, *"new placement students bring new techniques and learning activities into the school which can be used by teachers"*. This comment suggests that the site leader at Valley Ridge School valued pre-service teachers' currency of practice and expertise. Similarly, the statements made by the site leader at Heritage Heights School point to a view of professional experience as two-way learning where the pre-service teacher's contributions to the school are valued. For example, pre-service teachers *"bring in new and innovative ideas"* and are a *"welcome addition to staff."* Whether reciprocal learning can be harnessed as a solution to address mentor teacher capacity was not evident in the data.

Theme 2: Pre-Service and Graduate Teacher Attraction and Retention in Regional and Remote Schools

Theme 2 explains two regional site leaders' perceptions of the challenges of attracting pre-service teachers in difficult to staff subjects and attracting graduate teachers to independent schools. Retaining graduate teachers who move to regional and remote areas was identified as a challenge by one site leader (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Pre-service and Graduate Teacher Attraction and Retention in Regional and Remote Schools
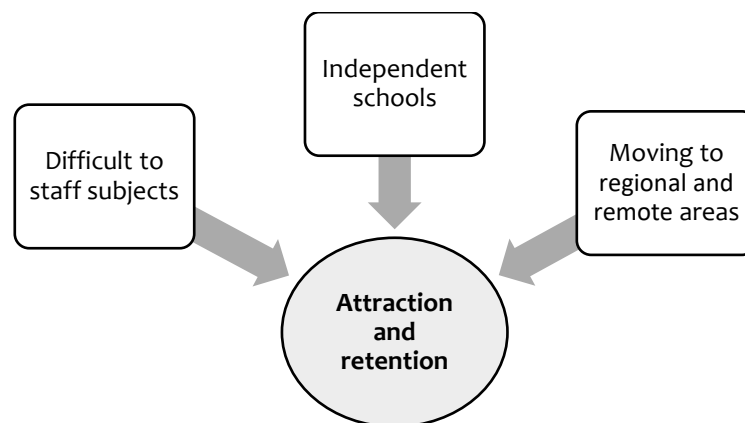
Attracting Pre-Service Teachers in Difficult to Staff Subjects. For the site leader at Coastal Plains School, mentor teacher capacity was not the challenge. Attracting pre-service teachers to undertake placement in difficult to staff subjects was. This site leader's experiences are contrary to those outlined previously where site leaders reported challenges to mentor teacher capacity. For example, the site leader at Coastal Plains School stated, *"we always have plenty of mentor teachers"* but countered this by adding, *"attracting students in design and tech and secondary math and science is still difficult".* This was impeded by an issue of supply as explained by the site leader, *"most of our PSTs are from (name of) University that offers a primary education course only."* The term 'most' suggests that pre-service teachers from other universities undertook placements at Coastal Plains School. The site leaders' response to questions 3 and 4 of the survey supports this interpretation: between 2018-2021 Coastal Plains School hosted placements for pre-servic teachers from three participating universities. It is unknown why mentor teacher capacity was not an issue at Coastal Plains School, or whether mentor teacher capacity was a challenge in difficult to staff subjects.

Attracting Graduate Teachers to Independent Regional and Remote Schools. This challenge was identified by the site leader at Valley Ridge School. This school requires teachers to be practising Christians as explained by the site leader, *"finding good quality Christian teachers who are willing to move to the (name of region) is difficult."* It appears that this requirement narrowed the pool of graduate teachers in the first instance and being in a regional area

compounded this challenge. The impact of this challenge is unknown. However as discussed previously, this school averted a teacher workforce shortage by hiring teachers they usually would not. This suggests that attracting graduate teachers to regional and remote independent schools—that are diverse and often affiliated with cultural, religious or non-mainstream educational philosophies—is even more challenging in these areas.

Retaining Graduate Teachers who Relocate. At Valley Ridge School, retaining graduate teachers who relocate, was also a challenge. As explained by the site leader, many graduate teachers were "*young and hadn't lived away from home before and so they became homesick.*" An outcome of becoming "*homesick*" was that these graduate teachers "*only served out a year or even less*". This suggests that for this site leader, the challenges to hosting placements and graduate employment were multi-faceted.

Theme 3: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Professional Experience

Theme 3 was identified by all three site leaders as a solution to the challenges identified above. Nonetheless, each site leader identified different strategies to achieve this. Solutions included "*experience living and teaching in regional and remote schools*" supported by "*incentives*", "*context understanding for placement*" and "*context matching for future employment*" (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: *Preparing Pre-service Teachers for Professional Experience in Regional and Remote Schools*

Experience Living and Teaching in Regional/Remote Schools and Incentives. Professional experience placements in regional and remote areas were a solution put forward by the site leader at Valley Ridge School to address homesickness and in turn, graduate teacher turnover. For example, "*country placements to help preservice teachers to get accustomed to being away from home*". According to this site leader, pre-service and graduate teacher attraction and retention requires experience and an understanding of working and living in regional and remote areas.

Similarly, the site leader at Coastal Plains School viewed placements as a way for pre-service teachers to develop a greater understanding of the schools' context and called on host universities to support this. For example, "*we would like the universities to offer more incentives to PSTs to experience a country placement*". For this site leader, incentives may attract more pre-service teachers in difficult to staff secondary teaching areas.

Context Understanding for Professional Experience Placement. At Heritage Heights School, a solution identified by the site leader was to prepare pre-service teachers by developing a "*greater understanding of our school's context*". The site leader did not elaborate on what this might entail. However, given the reported staffing challenges, one interpretation could be that it would be the role of the initial teacher education provider to prepare pre-service teachers for placement.

Context Matching for Future Employment. A benefit identified by the site leader at Coastal Plains School to improve graduate teacher attraction (and possibly retention) was context matching during professional experience. Context matching describes a process whereby the school and the pre-service teacher each decide, based on their experiences during placement, if the pre-service teacher is a good fit for living in the regional community and teaching in the school. Context matching was identified by this site leader as akin to a trial for graduate employment: "*there are always benefits as we get to work closely with teachers and observe if they are a good match for our school and for regional living*". From the perspective of this site leader, it appears as though context matching works both ways "*for them they decide if this is a place, they can see themself living and working*". Context matching may support graduate teacher attraction and retention by assisting school leaders and pre-service teachers to decide if they are a good match for the community and school and then supporting the pre-service teachers' employment in the regional and remote school.

Assertions

Taken together, these findings suggest that for these three site leaders, professional experience placements in their schools were beneficial. Pre-service teachers were perceived as having currency of practice that promoted reciprocal learning. Challenges to professional experience included developing mentor teacher capacity and pre-service and graduate teacher attraction and retention in regional and remote schools. No solutions were provided by site leaders to address the challenge of mentor teacher capacity. Context specific preparation for professional experience was identified as a solution to address pre-service teacher attraction and retention.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the perspectives of professional experience site leaders to understand the benefits and challenges of professional experience and graduate employment in regional and remote schools and how to address these issues. The main findings suggest that in these three regional schools, the challenges of mentor teacher capacity and pre-service teacher attraction and retention limited opportunities for professional experience. Solutions to these challenges included context specific preparation for professional experience and providing incentives to support pre-service teachers to experience teaching and living in regional communities.

Mentor Teacher Capacity

A key point raised by site leaders was concern about the availability of mentor teachers to supervise pre-service teachers during regional and remote professional experience due to the existing high workload, extenuated by the impact of COVID-19 limiting teacher capacity. While the issue of workload has been identified as a systemic issue (Australian Government, 2022) the New South Wales Teachers Federation has perceived the "*unsustainable workloads*" within the teaching profession as one of the main causes of teacher shortages, leading to burnout, with "*two-thirds of teachers say they are burnt out*" (New South Wales Teachers Federation, 23 April 2023). To further inform the state of teacher employment the Federation adds that in New South Wales public schools alone 2,172 permanent teaching positions were vacant in February 2023 with a widespread shortage in every area of New South Wales affected and in country areas, as many as 1 in 8 positions were vacant. This data is supported by the Australian Teacher Workforce Data for teachers registered in South Australia and New South Wales collected in 2018 (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2021, p. 6).

While the New South Wales Teachers Federations and the Australian Teacher Workforce Data support the contention that many teachers are overworked, a body of literature also confirms this premise (Gore, 2022; Hunter et al., 2022). The response of the site leaders affirms the findings

and literature in relation to the national teacher workforce shortage, the impacts of COVID-19 and specific issues prevalent to regional and remote schools (see Australian Government, 2022). To further inform the impact of COVID-19 on teacher workforce shortages, Collie and Mansfield (2022) highlight that staffing shortages resulted in increased workloads and stress as teachers covered classes when staff were absent, reducing planning, assessment, and professional development time.

Although the current models of professional experience rely heavily on mentor teachers being paid minimal money, in many cases teachers must self-nominate or be nominated to mentor and supervise pre-service teachers during placement. If a teacher is already under significant stress adding to the workload is likely to contribute to burn out. Teachers who self-select may not always have the skills to mentor and support pre-service teachers. Similarly, those who are selected may have a certain skill set that seems appropriate but still may need further support and training.

A range of interventions can be undertaken to engage more regional and remote mentor teachers. These may range from specific micro-credential courses aimed specifically at regional and remote education, associated pre-service teacher needs, or generally at early-career teachers. It may require targeted release time to engage in learning to explore new mentoring knowledge and skills, or the development of increased mentoring capacity through creating a group of key mentor teachers in a school community who lead this work and build mentoring knowledge capital and capacity across the broader school community.

Preparation for Professional Experience

Several respondents identified the importance of initial teacher education providers appropriately preparing pre-service teachers for professional experience and graduate employment in regional and remote schools. The importance of appropriate preparation, while important for all pre-service teachers, has greater significance for regional and remote education as many teachers are early-career teachers defined as those in the workforce for fewer than five years. Data collected in 2018 found that 18% of the teaching workforce were early-career teachers with more early-career teachers working in rural schools than in major cities (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2021). Although some argue that having early-career teachers as mentors is not the answer to solving the regional and remote teacher workforce shortage as they lack experience (Knipe & Bottrell, 2023) as well as the possibility to more likely to experience stress and burnout (Carroll et al., 2022), others suggest early-career teachers were just as effective as mentors as experienced teachers (Gore, 2022).

The need for appropriate preparation and training remains important and is strongly supported by several education systems and initial teacher education providers. The *Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021-2024* (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021) and the *Country Education Strategy 2021-2028* (Government of South Australia, 2021) highlight the need for specific regional and remote school preparation. The former document provides several resources to address the challenges of the limited uptake of pre-service teachers undertaking professional experience in regional and remote schools. Resources have been developed to induct and aid pre-service teachers to not only better understand the school context to support a more positive placement experience but to also increase the possibility of graduate employment (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021, p. 9). This approach resembles and builds on the federally funded project by Trinidad et al. (2012) and offers tangible support to address the issue.

Addressing the issue of pre-service teachers understanding of context falls within the remit of initial teacher education providers and host schools. Initial teacher educators need to appropriately prepare coursework for pre-service teachers for professional experience in regional and remote communities (Green & Reid, 2004; Roberts et al., 2022) supporting pre-service teachers to understand the school and community contexts, the learning needs of

students, and the best pedagogies and practices (Reid et al., 2012). Some researchers argue that few universities have coursework that focuses on preparing pre-service teachers for working in rural schools (Roberts et al., 2022; Trinidad et al., 2014; White & Reid, 2008). Roberts et al., (2022) posit that a continued lack of engagement in regional and remote schooling in initial teacher education programs exists. A lack of acknowledgment of the importance of this in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011/2021) and the *Accreditation Standards and Procedures* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011/2019) reflects a lack of recognition of the need to address the diversity of environments of rural teachers work. However, some initial teacher education providers have bucked this trend and responded by including regional and remote educational content in their initial teacher education programs, either through practical or simulated experiences (Ledger & Fischetti, 2020).

Initial teacher education providers such as the University of Adelaide have responded to the needs of regional and remote schooling by initiating specific training embedded within the core course content. The content has been tailored to prepare pre-service teachers who will undertake a regional and remote placement and is linked to both the placement and course assessment. As part of the professional experience program, pre-service teachers undertake a compulsory regional and remote placement in the third year of the undergraduate teaching degree drawing upon research to prepare them to understand these school and community contexts, the learning needs of students, and pedagogies and practices to effectively address these (Reid et al., 2012). Trinidad, et al. (2014) reported that 11 out of 39 Australian Universities provide courses on rural education. While implementation is not widespread nor sustained it is a start. It is not surprising however that gaps in coursework still exist, and many pre-service teachers feel unprepared for teaching and living in regional and remote contexts (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015) with regional and remote schools continuing to experience issues in relation to the professional experience of pre-service teachers, graduate employment, and retention (Halsey, 2019). It is imperative that in any instance the widespread implementation of evidence-based approaches is adopted and embedded systemically to address the long-standing regional and remote teacher shortage (Gore, 2022).

Incentives

Although some site leaders identified the need for universities to offer more incentives to pre-service teachers to experience a regional and remote placement, none provided insight into what these incentives should be. Some initial teacher education providers and educational systems have begun to incentivise placements. While this is not widespread some educational systems have begun to work in conjunction with initial teacher education providers to introduce incentives.

Universities such as Charles Darwin University provide, under certain circumstances, a travel grant to support regional and remote placements (Charles Darwin University, 2021). Flinders University also has a financial incentive for pre-service teachers who meet certain conditions to undertake professional experience in regional and remote schools. Several education systems also offer a range of incentives to pre-service teachers to undertake placements. For example, the New South Wales Department of Education (New South Wales Department of Education, 2021) in collaboration with major universities offers rural placement and facilitates the placement of pre-service teachers to regional and remote areas of New South Wales, provides access to funding for travel, accommodation, and expenses during their rural placement, arranges accommodation and provides an opportunity to attend placement with a peer who is also eligible for the program. Recently the South Australian Department for Education (Government of South Australia, 2021) and Catholic Education South Australia (Catholic Education South Australia, 2024) trialled a very similar incentivised system for 4th year pre-service teachers, even in some cases providing USB Dongle Wi-Fi sticks to aid pre-service teachers who could not access Wi-Fi due to

geographical isolation. In these innovative programs the education systems liaised closely with the initial teacher education providers in South Australia to select and coordinate pre-service teachers and the regional/remote placements. The process involved interviewing and then selecting candidates to try and provide the best *match* for both the school and pre-service teachers. Both education systems considered the pre-service teachers' life experience, subject specialisation and general background in considering the regional/remote placement location. Data are not available as to whether this program led to an increase in any regional and remote employment.

Conclusion

Research undertaken in this paper investigated the research question: *What are the benefits, challenges, and implications of undertaking a placement in regional and remote schools and the consequent impact on regional and remote employment?*

It is evident that a key part of finding a solution to the employment needs of regional and remote schools, and to inspiring/encouraging pre-service teachers to undertake a regional/remote placement, is ensuring that students have quality experiences in regional and remote schools, either experiential or placement. Experiential visits to schools in these areas have been successful in highlighting an appealing lifestyle in rural areas (for example *Beyond the Line*) (https://education.nsw.gov.au/). The professional experience placement, as Kline et al. (2013) suggest, is integral to ensuring awareness of teaching and living in communities and makes the transition easier if employed in regional and remote schools. Successful professional experience in regional and remote schools can lead to pre-service teachers deciding upon graduate employment in regional and remote communities (Halsey, 2009). Taken together this indicates benefits for both schools and pre-service teachers when professional experience in regional and remote communities considers the importance of context matching.

These findings suggest that the priority is securing a placement, rather than promoting professional experience in regional and remote schools for educative purposes. As highlighted previously, the benefits of sourcing a placement may be outweighed by the challenges of undertaking professional experience if not part of a larger strategy to prepare pre-service teachers for regional and remote professional experience. Many universities and departments offer financial incentives for pre-service teachers to undertake professional experience in regional and remote schools, such as at Flinders University where incentives are available for those who have a grade point average above five. This appears to be a way to select pre-service teachers with the understanding and skills to succeed in regional and remote schools and reflects the literature (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Taken together, the data indicate that incentives provided by universities to promote the uptake of professional experience in regional and remote schools remain limited. This study and subsequent findings are relevant to current debates and issues surrounding teacher shortages and particularly shortages in regional and remote contexts. The findings provide insight into the lived experiences of schools and their strategies to support regional and remote professional experience placements and transition graduates into the workforce within their schools. Themes extracted from the survey data centered on mentor teacher capacity in regional and remote schools, preparation for professional experience and graduate employment, as well as incentives for professional experience and graduate employment.

Implications

We argue that education departments and schools focus on the role of mentors in regional and remote schools. We suggest that we may need to reimagine mentors as someone beyond the classroom and not necessarily the class teacher. This would take pressure off the class teacher during times of massive teacher shortage. The mentor would be supernumerary and work as a

conduit between classroom teacher and pre-service teacher. This allows for reflective practice and processes as advocated by Jennifer Gore and the implementation of the *Quality Teaching Rounds* (Gore et al., 2023).

Previous studies have evidenced the importance of preparation for professional experience and the perceived lack of attention provided by universities (Roberts et al., 2022). They caution against incentives for regional and remote professional experience that are not supported by coursework and argue that while the New South Wales Department of Education provides incentives to attract teachers to rural areas and scholarships and support for initial teacher education in rural areas, initial teacher education courses are not required to provide a focus on rural schools and communities. They further argue that new graduates cannot be community ready or school ready for regional and remote settings, let alone classroom ready (Roberts et al., 2022) if this is not evident in the initial teacher education program. Sending students to regional and remote schools without being prepared can be detrimental for all parties. This view is also presented in the literature. Although teacher educators argue that professional experience can help pre-service teachers decide if they want to teach in regional and remote locations (Kline et al., 2013) and are a good opportunity for a school to *trial* pre-service teachers to determine if they are a good match for the school and the community, the match would be better if the students are better prepared for the context.

Finally, based on the findings we recommend a commitment to regional and remote schools to be more evident within initial teacher education programs like those already developed in South Australia, Western Australia, and New South Wales. This commitment needs to be recognized at a systems level and differentiated within initial teacher education professional standards and practices. Attention and specialization in these diverse contexts can be undertaken as either a stand-alone model or embedded in courses that specialize in differentiation, inclusive education and more importantly place-based pedagogies (Gruenewald, 2003; Yemini et al., 2023). Supporting, encouraging, and raising the profile of teaching in regional and remote areas may attract more pre-service teachers to these areas and in turn improve the learning outcomes of students within these contexts.

Limitations

This qualitative study was limited by the number of site leaders, regions and Australian states represented. This study was also limited by capturing only site leaders' perspectives. Understanding the perspectives of different professional experience partners who represent regional and remote schools across Australia would have provided the opportunity to triangulate the data over space and with different groups of people and strengthen the credibility of this study. A further limitation of this study is the single data source: a survey. Interviews and observations may have enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits, challenges, and implications of pre-service teacher professional experience and graduate teacher employment and strengthened the credibility of this study. Finally, this study presents site leader's perspectives at a moment in time and the conditions and contexts what shaped site leaders' experiences during this time may have changed.

Ethical Considerations

This research is approved by Charles Darwin University (H22074) and adheres to the National Statement Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the Australian Association for Research in Education Statement of Ethics.

Authors' Note

In this paper, the authors use the terms 'regional and remote' to define geographic remoteness, which is determined according to population and distances travelled to access services. Five

remoteness classes are described in the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia Plus (ARIA+). The remoteness classes are *Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote, and Very Remote* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In much research and policy, schools located outside *Major Cities* are described as regional or remote, conflating *Inner* and *Outer Regional* and *Remote and Very Remote*.

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

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

The current staffing crises in rural, regional, and remote schools demands the need for Initial Teacher Education providers to prepare and promote regional, rural and remote locations to their pre-service teachers to ensure teachers are employed in regional/rural/remote locations (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Teaching in a regional, rural or remote context carries with it unique challenges and exceptional opportunities that are often difficult for graduate teachers to comprehend, particularly when pre-service teachers have no prior experience of these locations (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). For some time, regional, rural and remote schools across all Australian states and territories have struggled to attract and retain teachers. This is due to several factors involving geographical location, access to services and a lack of understanding about adjusting to life in regional, rural and remote locations (Young et al, 2018; Versland et al, 2022). This problem is exacerbated in Queensland since most Queensland schools (69%) are outside metropolitan

regions (Department of Education, Queensland Government, 2023). Schools in hard to staff locations are turning to initial teacher education providers for assistance in employing new graduates so that they can staff their schools with pre-service teachers (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Due to the teacher shortage, schools have begun to employ teachers under Alternative Authority to Teach contracts, whereby people who have not completed a teaching degree are employed as classroom teachers. In 2021, the Queensland College of Teachers received 888 applications from pre-service teachers to work in Queensland schools under an Alternative Authority to Teach to help meet staffing needs. Most Alternative Authority to Teach positions were granted in regional, rural and remote contexts, which is another indication of the staffing crisis in these contexts (Queensland College of Teachers, 2022).

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

Literature Review

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

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

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

opportunities for professional growth in the hands of individual school administrators. With less certainty for career development opportunities for teachers in regional, rural and remote locations, it seems that the perceived professional barriers to teaching in these locations will remain a concern.

Relocating to unknown locations can be burdensome for new teachers (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). The personal barriers they face, including foregoing family and friendship support networks and loss of access to services, can become detractors to life in regional, rural and remote locations (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). Indeed, some have experienced the "*fishbowl effect*" (Kline et al., 2013, p. 8) when living in small communities' and this limits the ability for teachers to spread their professional and personal wings (Kline et al., 2013; Miller & Haynes, 2016). Identifying intrinsic motivators are key in overcoming personal barriers, such as enjoying working with young people, intellectual fulfilment, satisfaction of contributing to society and providing positive role models (Versland et al., 2022; Young, 2017).

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

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

They identify rural consciousness as the development of an individual's attitudes and values, and capacity to adapt culturally, geographically and professionally. It may include knowledge, emotions, values and attitudes, all of which can be developed should the individual be willing. Kelly and Fogarty's (2015) work show previous attitudes and values may hinder learning and growth, or prior knowledge may contradict rural values. That is, pre-existing prejudices may hamper cultural adaptation and thwart social cohesion. They identify the lack of knowledge pre-service teachers have about teaching in regional, rural and remote communities has led to a fear

of teaching in those locations and acts as an emotional blocker to learning (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Cuervo and Acquaro (2018) found that rural placements can positively influence the attitudes of pre-service teachers toward regional, rural and remote positions. Given their encouraging findings it follows more should be done to widen their engagement with regional, rural and remote locations. If new opportunities can be provided for pre-service teachers to learn and experience regional, rural and remote communities then they may be open to adopting new values and attitudes about regional/rural/remote teaching. In this way pre-service teachers can be supported to develop a greater rural consciousness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Results

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

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

Figure 1: *Overview of Thematic Analysis*

Locational considerations	Emotional considerations	Social Considerations	Cultural considerations	Professional considerations

• Isolation
  • shopping
  • travel
  • accommodation
• Beauty
• Pace of life
• Scarcity of resources
• Internet access
	• Debrief network
	  • internal & external
	• Relationships & rapport
	  • communication
	  • empathy
	  • connecting to community
		• Fish bowl
		• Personal investment
			• Acceptance - no judgement
			• Challenges
			  • poverty
			  • dress standards
			  • communicating
			  • sorry business
			• Benefits
			  • teacher aids
			  • living culture
			  • bilingual
				• Beginning teacher support
				• Behaviour management
				• Pedagogies
				• Career progression
				• Personal goals

Locational Considerations

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

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

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

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

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

Emotional Considerations

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

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

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

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

Social Considerations

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

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

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

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

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

Cultural Considerations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Professional Considerations

The fifth and final theme is the professional considerations relevant to participants' perceptions of their future teaching careers. These were divided into five key areas: beginning teacher

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

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

Although participants were often negatively impacted by their location, in terms of resources and logistics, they all felt the benefits of immersing themselves in community had helped them to successfully adapt to living in their regional, rural or remote locations. The participants within this study clearly chose to teach in a regional, rural and remote context because they were interested

in these communities, were keen to undertake such a personal challenge and wanted to make a positive contribution to communities. These three factors were similarly identified by Lock et al (2012) along with two other factors which were they were invited to apply, or they were inspired by a university placement as a pre-service teacher.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

The results of this initial study have been used to broaden pre-service teachers' understandings of and preparedness for teaching in regional, rural and remote locations by informing initial teacher education courses. The research achieved its aim to build a greater understanding and appreciation for teaching in these contexts through the sharing of the experiences of early career teacher graduates working in regional, rural and remote locations. The participants within this research have shared their journey in developing a greater rural consciousness and enabled

the researchers to explore the cultural adjustments made by early career teachers. This study pays close attention to the personal stories of participants to offer insights into the development of a rural consciousness.

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

Acknowledgement

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Increasing Year Four Regional Students' Writing Achievement Through the Universal Design for Learning

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Abstract

This article examines how incorporating the Universal Design for Learning into writing instruction could improve the writing achievement of year four students in regional Victoria, Australia. The Universal Design for Learning is an instructional approach that aims to provide students with meaningful learning experiences through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. Using evaluative reflection research and a mixed methods approach, data were obtained from a year four classroom of 16 students aged 9-10 years. Convenience sampling was used to access student work samples and the diagnostic and summative assessment data of these students. Personal identifiers were removed before being received by the researcher to provide a neutral and objective analysis. Findings indicated a 15 percentage-point increase in students' writing achievement average after the Universal Design for Learning was implemented in writing instruction. Differentiation through the Universal Design for Learning supported students' individual writing abilities, strengths, and interests, plays a significant role in year four students' engagement, participation, and writing achievement. Implications for regional education include the importance of evidence-based instructional approaches that support student participation, inclusion, and equity by ensuring all students can be successful in their learning.

Keywords: *Universal Design for Learning, writing instruction, writing achievement, regional education, differentiation*

Introduction

Swift Primary School (pseudonym) is a co-educational government primary school located in regional Victoria, Australia. There are approximately 250 enrolments throughout foundation to year six, and the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage value is 800 (My School, 2024). The school is in a low socioeconomic regional area, with a variety of culturally and linguistically diverse families who are impacted by low socioeconomic status and intergenerational poverty (My School, 2024). Approximately 20% of students are learning English as a Second Language, and several students have intellectual or behavioural disabilities that impact their learning (My School, 2024). Swift Primary School has a strong focus on embracing student diversity and delivering a strengths-based approach to learning through evidence-based practices. Explicit instruction through the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Fisher & Frey, 2008) is the main instructional approach . A School-wide Positive Behaviour Support framework (Hepburn, 2022) is in place to support student behaviour.

The 2023 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results show that year four students at Swift Primary School are working well below average in writing, spelling, and

grammar when compared to students with similar backgrounds (My School, 2024). Proficient literacy skills inform a student's future academic success and participation in schooling, society, and employment (Dietrishson et al., 2020; Hanemann, 2015). Research shows that year three students performing below the national literacy standards are at high risk of never catching up to expected levels (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2024).

The year four Victorian students' academic achievement, engagement, and participation are impacted by several factors, including low socioeconomic status, intergenerational poverty, family violence, poor attendance, and intellectual disabilities (Duke, 2020). Poor school attendance is an ongoing factor impacting student learning, with approximately 50% of Victorian students attending 90% or more of the time (My School, 2024). According to Duke (2020) and Benoit & Kearney (2022), poor attendance has significant negative consequences for students, including an increased risk of school dropout, mental health problems, and poor academic achievement throughout primary and secondary schooling. The COVID-19-related school closures and online learning arrangements that occurred throughout 2020-2021 in regional Victoria negatively impacted year four students' academic achievement and school engagement. The challenges of online learning during a global pandemic caused significant disturbance and disadvantage to year four Victorian students' initial literacy learning (who were in foundation and year one at the time) (König & Frey, 2022). Initial literacy instruction is the foundation of any students' future academic achievement (Double et al., 2019; Quinn & Philippakos, 2023). Low writing achievement also negatively impacts academic achievement across the curriculum, as most learning areas require students to use language for a range of purposes, such as interpreting, analysing, and creating (Griffiths & McLean, 2022).

The several factors negatively impacting year four students' writing achievement emphasise the strong need for an inclusive and evidence-based instructional approach, such as the Universal Design for Learning, to be implemented in writing instruction to support all students' writing achievement. The Universal Design for Learning has been selected for its ability to implement differentiation based on students' individual learning needs and abilities. The current writing program is delivered using explicit instruction through the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model. By implementing the Universal Design for Learning alongside the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model in writing instruction, students will have access to multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression in every writing lesson (Centre for Applied Special Technology, 2024; Crowther et al., 2023). Hence, it is the aim of this article to shed light on how the Universal Design for Learning can improve year four students' writing achievement.

Literature Review

Recent literature showed that socioeconomically disadvantaged students often experience a combination of physical, social, emotional, and economic factors that negatively impact their initial literacy learning and language development (Duke, 2020; Su et al., 2020; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Three studies found a strong positive correlation between adverse childhood experiences and poor school attendance and literacy achievement (Duke, 2020; Su et al., 2020; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Adverse childhood experiences (abuse, neglect, poverty, household dysfunction, or having a disability or impairment) were associated with poor school engagement, participation, and connectedness to school and learning (Duke, 2020; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). While both Tomaszewski et al. (2020) and Su et al. (2020) examined Australian participants and data records (Medicare and NAPLAN), the study by Duke (2020) focused on American year nine and eleven secondary school students. On the other hand, Su et al. (2020) examined the influence of additional learning needs (hearing impairment and speaking English as a Second Language) on a student's literacy and numeracy achievement, highlighting the importance of differentiation to support disadvantaged learners.

The COVID-19-related school closures and online learning arrangements that occurred throughout 2020 and 2021 significantly impacted students' writing achievement. Three studies found a significant decrease in student engagement, attendance, and literacy achievement after extended periods of online learning (Ewing & Cooper, 2021; König & Frey, 2022; Thoma et al., 2023). Ewing & Cooper (2021) reported that younger children were more affected due to relying on their parents and carers for support in navigating technology and managing at-home learning. While Ewing and Cooper (2021) focused on Victorian participants, König and Frey (2022) completed a systematic review with data from several countries, including Australia. Interestingly, Thoma et al. (2023) concluded their study by highlighting the strong need for teachers to implement inclusive, active learning strategies that foster student engagement, connectedness, and participation in post-COVID-19 learning environments.

The impact of the Universal Design for Learning on student academic achievement has been examined in various curriculum areas, including writing, science, mathematics, music, history, and physical education (Crowther et al., 2023; Haegele et al., 2024; Hashey et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2022; Kieran & Anderson, 2019; Super et al., 2021; Thoma et al., 2023). These studies were conducted in American and European contexts and were completed in various curriculum areas and learning contexts, including early years, primary, secondary, and tertiary education settings. They indicated that the program increased students' academic achievement and engagement in learning. Multimodal teaching and learning strategies including hands on, visual, musical, and auditory strategies were beneficial for minimising cognitive overload through clear and cohesive learning materials and instructions (Apostolou & Linardatos, 2023; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2020). Interestingly, multimodal strategies are also supported by cognitive load theory, where they can reduce extraneous load and improve both comprehension and recall (Sweller, 2011).

In conclusion, the literature reviewed provides understanding and insight into the combined factors that influenced students' low writing achievement and the existing relevant literature on the Universal Design for Learning and student achievement. In what follows, I examine whether this program could lead to similar results in an Australian context by studying how it could improve year four Victorian students' writing achievement.

Method

Evaluative reflection research in the form of systematic inquiry in the workplace was used to examine the research question (Hilton & Hilton, 2020). A benefit of evaluative research in this problem and context was to address a problem and goal in a regional Victorian and to provide exploration in the key areas of writing instruction and writing achievement (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). When conducted in a school setting, evaluative research can produce context-specific findings and actionable recommendations to improve student academic achievement (Hilton & Hilton, 2020; Kervin et al., 2016). This study aimed to provide implications for regional education and uncover ways to support the learning needs of all students. Convenience sampling was used by selecting an available classroom of year four learners. The benefits of convenience sampling included convenient access to data in the relevant problem and context (Kervin et al., 2016). A mixed methods approach consisting of quantitative and qualitative data was collected from a year four classroom of 16 students aged 9-10 years. The personal identifiers of all data and information used for this study were removed prior to being received by the researcher to provide a neutral and objective analysis of the findings. A thematic analysis was completed on the data to holistically analyse the results and answer the research question (Hilton & Hilton, 2020).

The Universal Design for Learning was implemented into teaching and learning across the span of a four-week informative writing unit focusing on video games. The Victorian Curriculum content descriptors being addressed were:

- Plan, draft and publish imaginative, information and persuasive texts demonstrating increasing control over text structures and language features and selecting print and multimodal elements appropriate to the audience and purpose (VCELY266) (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024).
- Reread and edit texts for meaning, appropriate structure, grammatical choices and punctuation (VCELY267) (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024).

The intended learning outcomes of the informative writing unit were:

- Students will plan, draft, and publish an informative writing piece.
- Students will proofread their own writing to check for clarity and readability.
- Students will develop confidence in applying appropriate grammatical choices, including full stops, exclamation marks, question marks, commas, and apostrophes.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection Methods

To quantitatively measure year four students' writing achievement before and after implementing the Universal Design for Learning into writing instruction, 16 students' work samples were formally assessed twice against a curriculum-based writing rubric (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024). Students' writing skills were assessed against the following seven criteria: Ideas, organisation, presentation, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and voice (Sedita & Hasbrouck, 2023). Each criterion was in accordance with the Victorian Curriculum year three writing achievement standards and content descriptors (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024). Each criterion was worth three points, where one point indicated 'emerging', two points indicated 'mostly satisfactory', and three points indicated 'satisfactory'. A maximum score of 21 was available. Rubrics are reliable and valid assessment tools for measuring writing achievement, as a high-quality rubric allows educators to interpret student work consistently against an agreed set of standards (Hattie, 2012).

At the beginning of the study, students' writing achievement was diagnostically assessed before the Universal Design for Learning was implemented into writing instruction. The diagnostic assessment task required students to write a response to the following prompt: What is your favourite video game? Students had the option to select any video game of their choosing and were provided 60 minutes of writing time (one lesson). The teacher explicitly modelled the task and created a worked example at the beginning of the lesson before students began independently writing. No other supports were provided to students throughout independent writing time. The intent of this assessment was to authentically measure students' informative writing skills before the Universal Design for Learning was incorporated into instruction. The Universal Design for Learning was incorporated into an informative writing unit over four weeks. Writing lessons were conducted four times a week for 60 minutes in duration each. The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines were followed closely, ensuring students had multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression during each learning experience. Key strategies included: Multimodal (visual, verbal, auditory, and hands-on) strategies, explicit teaching (worked examples, modelling, and questioning) strategies, student-friendly writing checklists, writing templates, concrete resources (mini-whiteboards, letter-sound charts, magnetic letters), and opportunities for peer collaboration.

At the end of the study, students' writing achievement was summatively assessed after the Universal Design for Learning had been implemented into writing instruction for four weeks. The summative assessment task required students to write an information report on a video game of their choice. Students had the opportunity to research their topic using laptops, plan, draft, proofread, edit, and publish their information report. Formative feedback was provided throughout the writing unit to inform students' final submissions. Students spent four 60-minute lessons preparing their final information report for submission. This included planning,

researching, drafting, proofreading, editing, and publishing time. The summative assessment was completed individually by students. The aim of the summative assessment was to consolidate students' learning and measure the impact of the Universal Design for Learning on year four students writing achievement. The same curriculum-based writing rubric was used for both formal assessments to provide a clear comparison of students' academic achievement before and after the Universal Design for Learning was implemented into instruction. The quantitative data was numerically presented in tables and line graphs. All data was meaningfully presented in clearly labelled and organised tables and graphs (Hilton & Hilton, 2020). The data was analysed and reflected upon to answer the research question.

To qualitatively assess student progress and analyse and reflect upon the impact of the Universal Design for Learning on year four students' writing achievement, student work samples from the diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments were analysed and reflected upon by the researcher. The student work samples collected ranged from worksheets, drafts of student work, and entries from students' writers' notebooks. Three focus students were selected, including one learner performing at the expected level, one learner performing slightly below the expected level, and one learner performing well below the expected level. An anecdotal analysis and reflection were written for each student writing sample collected. Students' writing skills, including handwriting, grammar, punctuation, ideas, word choice, and sentence structure, were assessed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were made to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings and to ensure the wellbeing, safety, and privacy of participants' data. All personal identifiers of all data and information used for this study were removed prior to being received by the researcher (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023). No attempts were made to re-identify whom the data was associated with, and all reasonable steps were taken to prevent re-identification of any data collected (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023). No data from any Indigenous individuals was collected. The data presented in this project does not create additional risks of re-identification of the information or data. Additionally, the research carries a low risk to participants and the community (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023). Integrity was applied throughout the project, where the researcher remained neutral and objective. Precautions were taken to minimise any potential researcher bias, including the use of anonymous data collection methods and an external assessment moderation process to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings (Adie, 2022). All student data and information were collected anonymously and kept strictly confidential. Only the researcher had access to the de-identified data, and students were not identifiable from any of the student work samples or formal assessment results. The risk of a data leak was minimised by storing all data records and information related to the project on a secure, password- and authenticator-protected hard drive (Hilton & Hilton, 2020).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine how incorporating the Universal Design for Learning can increase year four students' writing achievement. A close examination of the quantitative and qualitative data suggests three themes: Increased writing achievement, strong levels of student engagement and participation, and the importance of differentiation for the academic success and inclusion of all learners. De-identified general demographic and academic data was provided anonymously at the beginning of the study to contextualise year four students' writing abilities. Table 1 collates the participants' demographic and academic data.

Table 1: *Participants' Demographic and Academic Data*

	Age (Years)	Year Level	Assessed Writing Level (Victorian Curriculum F-10)
Focus Student 1	9	4	3.5
Focus Student 2	9	4	2.5
Focus Student 3	10	4	1.5
Student 4	9	4	3
Student 5	10	4	2
Student 6	10	4	3
Student 7	9	4	2
Student 8	9	4	1.5
Student 9	10	4	3
Student 10	9	4	2
Student 11	10	4	2.5
Student 12	10	4	3.5
Student 13	10	4	2.5
Student 14	9	4	1.5
Student 15	9	4	1.5
Student 16	9	4	2

In Victoria, year four students should be working towards achieving level 4.0 by the end of year four. At the beginning of this study, our participants were expected to be working at approximately level 3.5 (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2024). Two of our participants were performing at 3.5, and 14 students were working below the expected level of achievement. Therefore, most students (88%) were working below the expected level of achievement in writing.

Theme 1: Increased Writing Achievement

The diagnostic and summative assessment data showed that most year four students' writing achievement increased after the Universal Design for Learning was implemented into writing instruction. Table 2 gathers the summary statistics of students' diagnostic and summative assessment results before and after the implementation of the program.

Table 2: *Diagnostic and Summative Assessment Data Summary Statistics*

| Student | Diagnostic Assessment | | Summative Assessment | | |
	Numerical Score	Percentage (%)	Numerical Score	Percentage (%)	Percentage-point change
Mean	11.21	53%	14.37	68%	15%
Median	11	52%	14	66%	14%
Mode	13	61%	13	61%	0%
Range	9	42%	10	47%	5%
Minimum	7	33%	9	42%	9%
Maximum	16	76%	19	80%	4%

After the Universal Design for Learning was implemented into writing instruction, the data showed a 15 percentage-point increase on average in students' writing achievement. Specifically, the mean assessment score increased from 11.21 (53%) at the beginning of the study to 14.37 (68%) at the end of the study. The mean assessment score increased by 15% (3.16 points). Median and mode follow the same pattern. Table 3 shows a further comparison of year four students' writing achievement before and after the study.

Table 3: *Comparison of Diagnostic and Summative Assessment Data*

| Student | Diagnostic Assessment | | Summative Assessment | | Difference |
	Numerical Score	Percentage (%)	Numerical Score	Percentage (%)	Percentage-point change (pp)
Focus Student 1	16	76%	18	85%	9
Focus Student 2	13	61%	15	71%	9
Focus Student 3	10	47%	18	85%	38
Student 4	13	61%	15	71%	9
Student 5	12	57%	19	90%	33
Student 6	13	61%	12	57%	-4.7
Student 7	9	42%	14	66%	23
Student 8	8	38%	14	66%	28
Student 9	13	61%	17	80%	19
Student 10	10	47%	12	57%	9
Student 11	12	57%	12	57%	0
Student 12	14	66%	19	90%	23
Student 13	n/a	n/a	14	66%	0
Student 14	7	33%	9	42%	9
Student 15	7	33%	9	42%	9
Student 16	n/a	n/a	13	61%	0

On the diagnostic assessment, the highest score was 16/21, and the lowest score was 7/21. Whereas, on the summative assessment, the highest score was 19/21, and the lowest score was 9/21. The greatest improvement was 8.0 points (see Student 3), and two students showed no improvement (see Student 6 and Student 11). Insufficient data was provided for two students due to repeated school absences. Table 4 further highlights the overall increase in year four students' writing achievement after incorporating the Universal Design for Learning into writing instruction.

Table 4: *Analysis of Diagnostic and Summative Assessment Data*

	Diagnostic Assessment		Summative Assessment	
Score of 50% or higher	8 students	50% of students	14 students	88% of students
Score of 70% or higher	1 student	6% of students	7 students	43% of students

Implementing the Universal Design for Learning into writing instruction had a positive impact on most of these year four students' writing achievement. There were four outliers in the data set (see Student 6, Student 11, Student 13, and Student 16). The varied levels of improvement can potentially be attributed to a range of factors that will be discussed in the discussion.

Theme 2: Strong Student Engagement and Participation

The second reoccurring theme in the data was a strong sense of student engagement and participation after incorporating the Universal Design for Learning into instruction. The student work samples showed consistent student engagement and participation across most learning activities and tasks. In an informative writing unit on video games, students chose their own writing topics and demonstrated their developing knowledge and understanding through various means. Several students utilised multimodal learning strategies, including planning their writing by visualising their ideas with symbols, images, and illustrations. Other students used written language, a structured writing template with guiding prompts provided by their teacher, or a combination of all strategies. Allowing students to write about familiar, interest-based topics and providing flexibility in how they expressed their learning led to sustained participation throughout the four-week writing unit. The impact of sustained student participation through the duration of the unit reflected positively in the summative assessment data, where most students showed increased academic achievement. This highlights the positive impact of the Universal Design for Learning on year four students' writing achievement, participation, and engagement in the classroom.

Theme 3: Differentiated Teaching and Learning

The final theme identified was that the Universal Design for Learning effectively provided differentiated teaching and learning opportunities for students. The student work samples, and assessment data indicated that the differentiation strategies that catered to students' individual writing abilities and learning needs were perhaps one of the most successful aspects of the project. Given the broad spectrum of abilities in the year four classroom, differentiation based on the content, process, and product was essential in ensuring all students received learning activities that were appropriate for their individual learning needs and writing abilities (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). The student work samples showed that all students received differentiation based on the content to extend upon their current writing abilities. For example, students' working at the expected level of achievement received scaffolding to incorporate descriptive vocabulary, subheadings, and paragraphs in their writing. Students working below the expected level of achievement were practising using full stops and capital letters correctly. By differentiating the content for these students, it ensured the task was an appropriate degree of difficulty for their writing abilities. It was clear from the student work samples that there was not

a single measure of success and that success looked different for each student based on their learning needs and abilities.

The student work samples demonstrated the use of a differentiated, student-friendly writing checklist for students to self-assess their own writing. Students working at the expected level of achievement used a writing checklist that encouraged them to integrate paragraphs, descriptive language, and correct punctuation in their writing. Whereas students performing below the expected level received a simplified version with visuals (symbols and images) to support them using full stops and capital letters correctly in each sentence. These resources were tailored to students' writing abilities and learning needs. A further three student work samples also showcased three students (performing below the expected level of achievement) who used a structured writing template to successfully complete the summative assessment task. This template had traceable sentence starters and prompts to support these students in being successful in their learning. The Universal Design for Learning facilitated differentiation in both the learning process and products produced by students. Differentiation through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression was essential in ensuring learning was of an appropriate degree of difficulty for students' writing abilities and learning needs. This ensured all students could be successful in their learning, which supported equity and inclusion in the classroom.

Discussion

The findings are broadly in line with themes identified in the existing literature examining the impact of the Universal Design for Learning on student achievement in European and American contexts One key similarity between this literature and my study is the increase in students' writing achievement after the Universal Design for Learning was implemented into instruction.

As in Hashley et al. (2020), my thematic analysis revealed that multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression in writing instruction generated strong student participation in most learning activities. In addition, my findings suggest that the use of an interest-based writing topic on video games actively engaged the year four students in writing by allowing students to write about a familiar topic they were passionate about. Existing literature showed the benefits of interest-based writing topics to support emergent writers, as when writers are confident in their subject matter, their attention can be focused on the mechanics of written language, including syntactic structures, handwriting, and vocabulary (Alzubi & Nazim, 2024; Nawal, 2018). Another existing study also recommended supporting struggling male writers through teaching and learning strategies that boost student motivation (De Smedt et al., 2018). This highlights the positive implications of student-centred approaches on regional Victorian students' engagement and participation in the classroom.

My findings revealed that multimodal teaching and learning strategies were integral to student success, engagement, and participation. This is well documented in existing literature the positive impact of multimodal teaching and learning strategies on student achievement (Apostolou & Linardatos, 2023; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2020; Crowther et al., 2023). These findings implicate the importance of providing differentiated learning opportunities based on students' individual learning needs and academic abilities in a regional education context.

In conclusion, the findings of this study broadly align with existing literature on the Universal Design for Learning and academic achievement and have strong implications for supporting the inclusion, participation, and active learning of students in regional education settings through the Universal Design for Learning. By implementing the Universal Design for Learning, instruction was tailored to meet individual student needs, strengths, interests, and current writing abilities. Similar to the findings in existing literature, students appeared more willing to attempt tasks, explore new writing skills, and refine their existing ones because learning activities were

achievable, engaging, and of an appropriate degree of difficulty (Goss & Sonnemann, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2014). These approaches reflect evidence-based practices that recommend drawing on students' funds of knowledge, strengths, and interests during teaching and learning (Ayre et al., 2022; Miller & Berger, 2020).

Limitations

Limitations of the project included the small sample size of 16 participants that were selected using convenience sampling. This reduced the amount of data collected and the generalisability of the findings to the broader population (Kervin et al., 2016). Nevertheless, my findings can potentially be extended to the broader year four cohort of participants in the same socioeconomic context. Another limitation is the lack of interaction between students and me, the researcher, within the classroom. Further research incorporating student observations and interviews would be beneficial to further examine the impact of the program on student engagement during both explicit teaching and independent writing time.

There were four outliers present in the quantitative data, including one student who showed no improvement between diagnostic and summative assessment, and one student scored one point less on the summative assessment than the diagnostic assessment (see Table 3). An additional two students did not complete the diagnostic assessment, which provided no point of comparison for their summative assessment score. Repeated student absences potentially influenced these four students' scores and caused a limitation in the data set by reducing the amount of data collected. One extraneous variable was the strong presence of explicit teaching alongside the Universal Design for Learning, as it could be interpreted that the increase in students' writing achievement was the result of the explicit teaching as opposed to the program. Further research incorporating control and dependent variable groups would be beneficial to examine these factors further and their impacts on students' writing achievement.

Actionable Recommendations Based on my Findings

Recommendation 1: Implementing the Universal Design for Learning

I recommend implementing the Universal Design for Learning in writing instruction across the year four cohort to proactively meet the diverse learning needs and writing abilities of all students. Incorporating multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression in writing instruction ensures equity and that student learning needs are met in this regional education setting. I encourage the year four teaching team to engage in Universal Design for Learning-related professional learning to increase their working knowledge and understanding of the program. Engaging with professional learning with content-focused learning, modelling of effective practices, feedback, and reflection is strongly suggested to strengthen teachers' ability to apply the Universal Design for Learning in practice (Barrio & Hollingshead, 2017; Craig et al., 2022). This provides opportunities for improving teaching practice, understanding the needs of regional students, and generating strategies to meet those needs. Key enablers include sufficient time and funding for professional learning, while constraints may involve limited time, funding, and a lack of support from school leadership. Differing or opposing pedagogical beliefs between teachers also may limit the success of this recommendation.

Recommendation 2: Team Planning and Collaboration

I recommend the year four teaching team collaborates through team planning to consistently implement Universal Design for Learning across the year four cohort. Collaboration through team planning allows teachers to share their knowledge and expertise and create a high-quality writing program. Team planning supports the delivery of a consistent, low variance curriculum cohort-wide (Silbey, 2019). Key enablers include effective collaboration and agreeing on the writing

program. Challenges may arise from limited planning time, potential staff absences during planning time, and differing pedagogical beliefs within the team, which could hinder success.

Recommendation 3: Reflective Practice

Lastly, I recommend the year four teaching team engages in regular reflective practice to assess the progress of implementing the Universal Design for Learning into instruction. Reflective practice allows teachers to identify the successes and areas for improvement specific to the regional Victorian student cohort (Super et al., 2021). Educators should meet informally each week and consult with school leadership to reflect on practice. Frequent reflection allows teachers to develop and implement strategies that promote equity and inclusion in the classroom (Sepdulveda et al., 2024). Enablers for this recommendation include school leadership providing sufficient time for whole-team reflections to occur and appropriate guidance. Challenges may arise from time constraints, lack of leadership support, opposing pedagogical beliefs among staff, and differing priorities based on individual student needs in each classroom.

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Bridging the Gap: Comparative Analysis of Academic Support and Teacher-Student Relationships in Faith-Based Schools Across Regional and Urban Contexts

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Abstract

This article investigates the association between teachers providing academic support to their students and student's perceptions of their relationships with their teachers, with a focus on the role of geographical location. Utilising the Revised School Climate Measure, this pilot study surveyed 522 students across four Australian faith-based schools—two urban, and two regional schools. The data were analysed using a combination of correlations, one-way MANOVA and binomial regression. The results indicate that academic support is a contributing factor to students in regional schools reporting stronger relationships with their teachers compared to their urban peers. This study provides a foundation for future research and could be replicated on a larger scale. The implications offer school leaders and policymakers additional information to help address areas of disadvantage within regional Australian schools, while also highlighting the need for further investigation in this area.

Introduction

Students in regional, remote and rural communities generally experience lower academic achievement and school outcomes compared to their urban peers (Guenther et al., 2023; Halsey, 2018). This disparity arises from various factors, including school-based challenges such as small class sizes, composite classes, and a lack of specialist teachers. Additionally, regional cohorts are often impacted by community incidents like severe weather and tragic events (Halsey, 2018). Subsequently, there is an increased burden in terms of emotional toil and workload on teachers within schools in regional communities. In response to these challenges, relationships between teachers and students in regional schools have become increasingly important, not only for students but also for the broader community. These relationships appear to motivate teachers to become highly invested in their students' academic success (Angelini et al., 2021). Consequently, teachers in regional schools often dedicate more time to providing academic support to their students to maintain and improve academic achievement (Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023). However, the relationship between geographical location, teacher-provided academic support, and students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers remains understudied.

This research aims to investigate this connection, exploring how the unique context of regional schools might influence the interplay between academic support and teacher-student relationships, with a specific focus on faith-based educational settings.

Schools often provide more academic support to help students improve their performance (Halsey, 2018). This can involve innovative curriculum deployment, dedicated support programs,

and greater community activities designed to ensure that students derive meaning from their educational experience and see broader impacts into the community (Halsey, 2018). In many circumstances, the schools become a quasi-community hub, as the community uses the school to forge connections with each other. These programs seek to make academic activities more accessible and interesting to students, with clear and explicit links to practical applications (Angelini et al., 2021). Because of this, the role of the teacher-student relationship is vital to ensuring that schools in regional communities maintain a positive climate and high levels of school satisfaction and academic achievement.

Current research into the role of teacher-student relationships has not focussed on regional schools' unique situation in sufficient detail. For example, even accounting for different sample sizes, Gavidia-Payne et. al. (2015) focussed their results on pastoral care and student wellbeing, as opposed to examining academic achievement. Zhou et. al. (2021) compared teacher-student relationships in mathematics classes in rural and urban China. The findings from both Gavidia-Payne et. al. (2015) and Zhou et. al. (2021) indicated that students in rural areas had closer relationships with their teachers and received additional academic support compared to their urban peers.

This study aims to explore the relationship between academic support, teacher-student relationships, and geographical location in Australian schools. Specifically, there was an attempt to address the following research questions:

1. Do students in regional schools report stronger relationships with their teachers compared to their urban counterparts?
2. Is there a connection between the level of academic support provided and the strength of teacher-student relationships?
3. How does the geographical location of a school influence the interplay between academic support and teacher-student relationships?

To investigate these questions, this paper will examine existing research on academic support and teacher relationships, providing clear definitions for these concepts within the context of our study. This paper will then utilise the Academic Support and Teacher Relationship domains from the Revised School Climate Measure [RSCM] (Zullig et al., 2015) to collect and analyse data from four faith-based Australian K-12 schools, two regional and two urban, during 2021 and 2022.

This research aims to contribute to our understanding of how geographical location may influence the dynamics of academic support and teacher-student relationships in Australian schools. The findings may have implications for educational policy and practice, particularly in addressing the unique challenges faced by regional faith-based schools.

What is Academic Support?

Academic support is specific teacher-led interventions with students in one-on-one or small-group settings to support student achievement (Moreira et al., 2018). Academic support goes beyond general class instruction but focuses on the teacher adapting their pedagogy to ensure that students understand what they need to do to succeed (Angelini et al., 2021). It is in this context that the teacher-student relationship is further strengthened, as Angelini et. al. (2021) note, that the teacher not only provides the student with tailored support, but also provides the student with emotional support. Emotional support considers the student's perspective of the task, with the teacher empathising with the student's challenges (Angelini et al., 2021). In adopting this approach, the teacher can better adapt and adjust how they explain and guide the student through the task that has been assigned. This, in turn, allows the student to feel supported and that the teacher has considered their needs when approaching the task at hand.

Beyond the emotional support provided by teachers, the type of academic support provided can involve small groups where students with similar needs are brought together and taught the same way (Bolic Baric et al., 2016). This is most likely a different way from extensive classroom instruction however it is not necessarily effective for students (Bolic Baric et al., 2016). Individualised support allows the teacher to adapt their delivery method to match student needs and interests (Yates et al., 2021). Since to the growth of online learning in Australian schools, students found that individualised academic support was most effective in maintaining their academic results (Archer, 2012; Ronksley-Pavia & Neumann, 2022; Yates et al., 2021). Individualised academic support in this context also includes the use of differentiated pedagogical techniques. Differentiated pedagogical techniques can have a significant influence on student results in regional schools, as students are able to undertake personalised learning journeys through curriculum points (Murphy, 2022). This enhances teacher-student relationships and helps to create a positive school climate, as students perceive the learning environment as supportive and a contributory factor to school connectedness (Zullig et al., 2011).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Teacher-student relationships are a hallmark of a positive school climate (Zullig et al., 2010, 2011). A positive school climate helps ensure that all students are satisfied with their experience and are inspired to do their best pastorally, academically and in extra-curricular activities (Zullig et al., 2011). Teacher-student relationships have been shown to assist students in navigating life-stage transitions (Longobardi et al., 2016), improving academic self-efficacy (Hughes et al., 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011; Martin, 2014), enhancing student wellbeing (García-Moya et al., 2020; Krane et al., 2016; Sointu et al., 2017), the sense of safety within the school (Lenzi et al., 2017) and even family dynamics (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015). Therefore, it is not unexpected that positive teacher-student relationships have an impact on the students individually but also on the community. Hence, teacher-student relationships are meaningful in a regional school for both academic development as well as community benefits.

Recent research into teacher-student relationships has centred on the impact of positive relationships on student outcomes. Virat (2022) undertook an examination of the role that compassion has on student connectedness. In this context, compassionate is part of the attributes that teachers within faith-based schools need to display to be effective in their role (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). This is in the same vein as the findings from Morgan & Cieminski (2021), which identified the role of adult support as a critical element for student motivation and connectedness. If students feel cared for and supported by the critical adults in their school life, then it follows that they will feel connected to the school environment and thus be inspired to achieve academically in schools. Barksdale et. al. (2021) noted that when extended across an entire classroom, the connectedness facilitated by the teacher can inspire group-level achievement.

As students in regional schools often require further academic support than their urban counterparts to achieve similar grades (Halsey, 2018), there is a need to examine the impact of teacher-student relationships on academic outcomes. Teachers are often identified as significantly impacting students' motivation levels. This is motivation to succeed and keep a significant adult in their lives happy and approve of their behaviour. Hughes et. al. (2012) note that these relationships are vital, especially in the early primary school years. The quality of teacher-student relationships can help predict behavioural issues and academic performance from the commencement of primary school to the later years of primary schooling (Hughes et al., 2012; Spilt et al., 2012). Similar observations can be made in secondary education as well. However, results are not as strong in larger classes (Allen et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2021), which can often be the norm in secondary school contexts (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018). When replicated across an entire cohort or classroom, students support each other in the same vein that a teacher

would (Barksdale et al., 2021). This involves providing academic and social support, with students looking to the teacher as a model of interacting with each other (Barksdale et al., 2021).

When magnified across an entire school, positive teacher-student relationships can make the classroom a protective factor for students. Regional communities are susceptible to significant events such as natural disasters, so students and their families lean into the school for additional support (Edwards & Baxter, 2013). This is because the school is identified as a positive place for students, and there is a more vital willingness for the students and their families to engage positively with the school's academic program (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015; Lenzi et al., 2017; Ulviye et al., 2018). It then falls onto the teacher to spend more time with students to improve their academic outcomes. Given that regional schools have smaller class sizes than urban schools (Halsey, 2018), the relationships that develop within the classroom in regional schools are of higher quality than in urban schools because of the environment of the classroom (Allen et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2021).

Challenges of Regional Schools

Research consistently indicates a relationship between a school's geographic location and students' academic achievement levels (Halsey, 2018; Pegg & Panizzon, 2007; Sullivan et al., 2013, 2018). While the reasons for this disparity are complex and multifaceted, some researchers have suggested that current funding distribution models in Australia may favour urban schools (Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Halsey, 2018). However, it's important to note that other factors likely contribute to these differences, including socioeconomic variations in school communities, cultural differences, local employment opportunities, and attitudes towards education (Archer et al., 2024; Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Halsey, 2018).

One significant challenge faced by regional schools is the difficulty in attracting and retaining teachers (Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Murphy, 2020). This staffing issue may further constrain student achievement and opportunities in regional communities (Beswick et al., 2019). The interplay of these various factors creates a complex educational landscape in regional areas, warranting further investigation into how these challenges might influence teacher-student relationships and academic support.

Teachers working in regional schools often shoulder greater responsibilities that extend beyond the classroom. In addition to navigating the inherent challenges of regional education, these teachers frequently take on prominent roles within their communities. As a result, they become more recognisable figures, playing a significant part not only in their students' lives but also in the broader community (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015; Thiele et al., 2023). The ongoing provision of education, consistent operation of classes, and presence as a stable figure in students' lives can have a comforting effect that extends into the wider community (Berger et al., 2018; Coombe et al., 2015; Nye, 2016). This expanded role, while potentially rewarding, can also place significant pressure on teachers in regional schools.

Halsey (2018) notes that teachers in regional areas often face unique challenges, which may include dealing with the impacts of community events on their students' lives and learning. These circumstances underscore the importance of strong student-teacher relationships within regional schools, as teachers often serve as a source of stability and support for their students and the community at large.

Young people in regional communities often face unique challenges in obtaining educational qualifications (Cuervo, 2014). Many are acutely aware of their geographical isolation and the additional hurdles this creates, particularly in terms of teacher recruitment. This is supported by Pini et. al. (2010) who noted most students showed significant appreciation of teachers in their schools when there are multiple opportunities in urban settings they could be working in. Within

both Cuervo (2014) and Pini et. al.'s (2010) studies, students frequently cited their relationships with educators as a significantly positive influence in their lives.

In regional schools, a considerable number of students recognize the extra time, effort, and energy their teachers invest in their learning. These educators often strive to personalize the learning experience, balancing the complexities of the curriculum while making it relevant to the students' geographic location (Halsey, 2018; Waldrip et al., 2014).

According to Murphy (2022), academic support in these contexts typically involves higher levels of differentiation and one-on-one instruction. However, it's crucial to note that while these observations are significant, they may not encompass the experiences of all students in regional schools. The culmination of this indicates that students in regional schools require additional academic support compared to their urban peers. As a result of this, the relationships between teachers and students grow as teachers can invest more time, effort and energy into working alongside their students. Therefore, it can be expected that students in regional schools will report more positive relationships with their teachers than students in urban schools.

Methodology

This study was part of a broader project examining school climate and faith engagement. Students in faith-based schools were invited to complete an adapted version of the Revised School Climate Measure [RSCM] (Zullig et al., 2015). This measure enables assessments to be made from large, multi-school datasets and provides data for schools to make practical adjustments to improve the overall climate (Zullig et al., 2011). The RSCM measure developed by Zullig et. al. (2015) has advantages over other measures due to its preliminary testing in multiple countries and cultural backgrounds. As Australian schools become more reflective of a multicultural society (Davies, 2023), the reliability and validity of a school climate measure relevant to children from diverse backgrounds is paramount. Previous studies that have utilised the RSCM and its predecessor have demonstrated reliability and validity with white, urban students (Zullig et al., 2010), Latinx migrants (Zullig et al., 2014), students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Zullig et al., 2017) and Australian urban students (Petrie et al., 2019). The proven efficacy of the measure across these contexts provides confidence that the measure is an appropriate tool for the project.

Sample

This analysis examines responses from four Australian comprehensive (K-12) schools, two in urban areas (one in Western Australia and another in New South Wales) and two in regional areas (one in Queensland, one in New South Wales). The schools were chosen based on a convenience sampling method, where 12 schools were invited to participate, and the four participating schools responded. According to the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022), the two regional schools are classified as RA2 (Inner Regional community with less than 250,000 people), where the two urban schools are classified as RA1 (Major Cities). A total of 522 students participated, with 233 students from regional schools and 289 from urban schools responding to the survey (Table 2). Table 1 provides an overview of the statements students were asked to respond to and the Likert scale ratings provided.

To help to ensure responses were accurate reflections of student experiences, the final question in the RSCM asked students to use a Likert scale to respond to the statement: 'I have been honest in my answers'. Only students who responded with a 5 (Strongly Agree) or 4 (Agree) had their responses included in this study. It is noted that incorporating responses of 3 (Neutral) to 1 (Strongly Disagree) resulted in a larger statistical variation, likely due to the student responses received.

Table 1: *School Climate Domains Examined in Study*

Domain	Statement	Response Scale
Teacher Relationships		1 = Strongly Disagree 5 = Strongly Agree
	Teachers understand my problems	
	Teachers and staff seem to take a real interest in my future.	
	Teachers are available when I need to talk with them.	
	It is easy to talk with teachers.	
	Students get along well with teachers.	
	Teachers at my school help us students with our problems.	
	My teachers care about me.	
	My teacher makes me feel good about myself.	
Academic Support		1 = Strongly Disagree 5 = Strongly Agree
	I usually understand my homework assignments.	
	Teachers make it clear what work needs to be done to get the grade I want.	
	I believe that teachers expect all students to learn.	
	I feel that I can do well in this school.	

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics for all participants who completed the survey. Most participants were Caucasian, with 233 participants from regional schools and 289 from urban schools. The urban schools had a more diverse sample size, with a nearly equal proportion of male and female-identifying students across both groups.

Table 2: *Demographics: Number of Participants by age*

	10 Years Old	11 Years Olds	12 Years Old	13 Years Old	14 Years Old	15 Years Old	16 Years Old	17 Years Old	18 Years Old	Total
Regional Female	10	12	18	19	12	16	13	11	1	112
Regional Male	5	8	18	18	18	24	16	8	6	121
Regional Non-Binary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Urban Female	12	11	23	17	32	19	17	9	2	142
Urban Male	9	9	23	21	42	22	9	10	1	146
Urban Non-Binary	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total	36	40	82	75	105	81	55	38	10	522

Data Analysis and Results

All analyses were conducted using SPSS 29. As the study is comparing two domains exclusively, a Cronbach's Alpha test for reliability of items within each domain was conducted to ensure the comparisons were valid. A result of 0.79was returned, indicating a high level of reliability between the two measures (Cronbach, 1951; Zullig et al., 2014).

A Kendall's tau-b was chosen as the most appropriate analytical method for correlation as the data examined is ordinal in nature, maintained paired observations, and there is a monotonic relationship between the two domains (Kendall, 1945; Siegel, 1956). The test was undertaken on the combined dataset of 522 responses, and then the regional schools were compared with the urban schools.

Regional schools had a significant correlation of 0.604 between the teacher relationship and academic support domains, whereas urban schools had a smaller significant correlation of 0.459. This is a difference of 0.145, indicating that the connection between academic support and teacher relationships is stronger in regional than urban schools.

To determine the effect size of the school's geographical location on student-teacher relationships in this connection between the two domains, a one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) test was conducted. The One-Way MANOVA test was chosen as the geographic location is considered an independent variable, with the Academic Support domain and Teacher Relationship domains considered dependent variables. This enables the Hotelling's Trace test to be applied to determine the statistical significance of geographical location and the effect size (Don, 2018).

There was a statistically significant difference between the geographical location of the participants on the combined dependent variables, $F(2, 522) = 38.820$, $p < .001$; Wilks' $\Lambda = .961$; partial $\eta^2 = .0.39$.

A binomial logistic regression was conducted to ascertain the feasibility of establishing a model that establishes a relationship between academic support and teacher connections, considering the school's geographical location. The Box-Tidwell (1962) approach was used to evaluate the

linearity of the continuous variables in relation to the logit of the dependent variable. A Bonferroni adjustment was implemented, incorporating all eight terms in the model. This led to the acceptance of statistical significance only when the p-value was less than .0125 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018). According to this evaluation, it was determined that all continuous independent variables had a linear relationship with the logit of the dependent variable.

Subsequently, this model demonstrates 13.5% of the variance between regional and urban school correlation and the effect between academic support and teacher relationships using Nagelkerke R^2 could be explained. Figure 1 predicts the likelihood of academic support significantly influencing student perception of teacher-student relationships in regional schools. Figure 2 provides a comparison of urban schools and regional schools as base operations.

Figure 1: *Receiver Operator Characteristic Curve Predicting Interaction Between Academic Support and Teacher-Student Relationships in Regional Schools.*
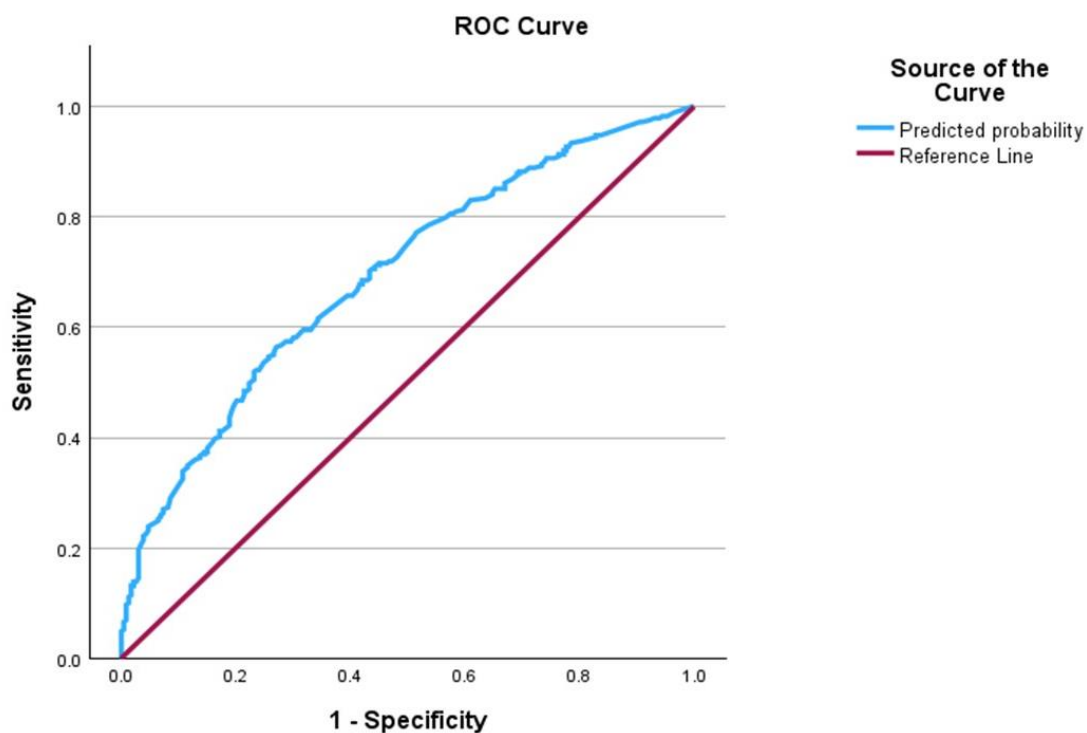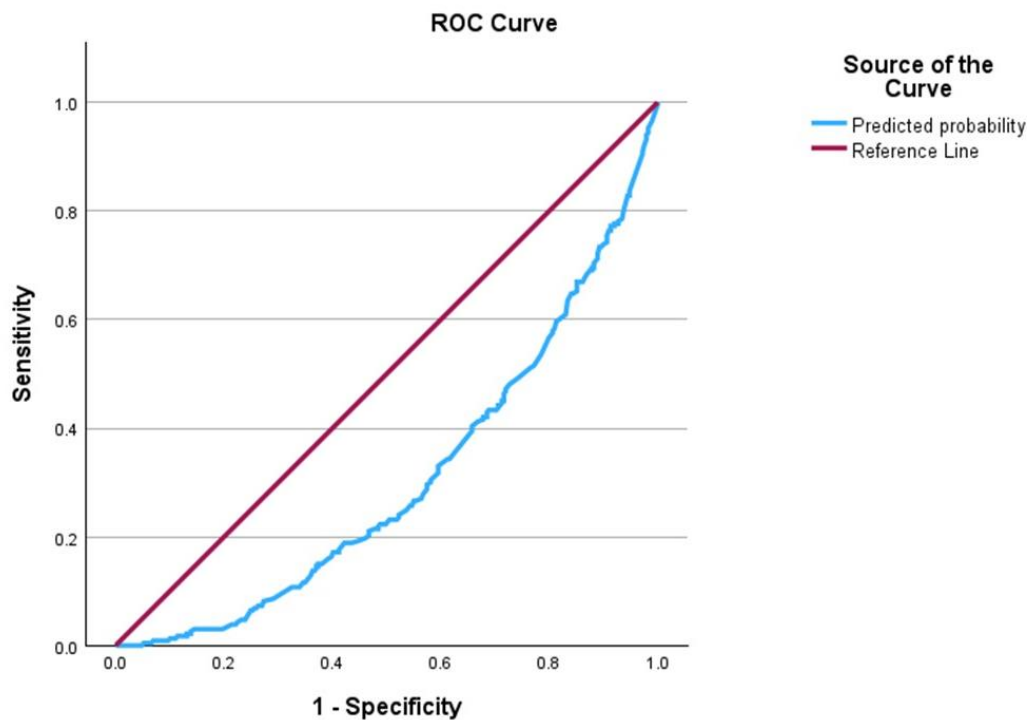
Figure 2: *Receiver Operator Characteristic Curve Predicting Interaction Between Academic Support and Teacher-Student Relationships in Urban Schools, Assuming Regional Schools as a Baseline*

This means that we can accurately determine that academic support significantly contributes to student perception of teacher relationships for schools in regional areas, with a small positive effect size of 0.35 (Table 3).

Table 3: *Between-Subject Test Results*

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	Teacher Relationships	45.656[a]	1	45.656	69.115	<.001	.035
	Academic Support	29.907[b]	1	29.907	57.514	<.001	.030

Discussion

The analysis of data collected using the adapted RSCM (Zullig et al., 2015) indicates that students in regional schools perceive their relationships with teachers as significantly supported by the academic support provided. This is unsurprising, given that students in regional schools receive more academic support than their peers and supports the hypothesis that stronger relationships form between teachers and students as a result.

However, we must consider these findings within the context of the study's limitations. Our sample size was relatively small and convenient, focusing exclusively on faith-based schools. This specific context may have influenced the results, as faith-based schools often emphasize strong community relationships (Archer, 2023), potentially amplifying the effect we observed.

It's also worth considering whether similar patterns might emerge in other contexts where increased academic support is provided. For instance, future research could explore whether catch-up tutorial groups (post-COVID) or other academic interventions in various school settings

yield similar improvements in teacher-student relationships. While the findings suggest a connection between academic support and stronger teacher-student relationships in regional schools, we cannot definitively claim causation. The relationship may be bidirectional, with strong relationships also potentially leading to increased academic support.

Given the nature of our sample, we should be cautious about drawing broad policy implications. However, these findings do suggest that the unique situation of regional schools may create an environment where academic support plays a crucial role in fostering positive teacher-student relationships. Future research with larger, more diverse samples could help clarify whether this pattern holds true across different contexts and school types.

Implications for Schools

In this context, teacher-led academic support initiatives can positively influence overall school climate and therefore satisfaction. This is particularly important in regional communities where there is significant competition between schools for enrolments, where competitive advantage is often a paramount concern for Principals and school leaders (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2020; MacDonald et al., 2020). Principals can support teachers by providing additional training and development for staff in providing personalised academic support, including differentiation techniques. In addition, Principals need to be supported by education departments in removing administrative burdens from teachers to assist in facilitating academic support to students (Halsey, 2018). The academic support provided by teachers through differentiation is a method that not only improves academic achievement but also provides an opportunity for teachers to ensure that students are learning in a manner that is suited to their circumstances (Murphy, 2022).

Schools can also take advantage of the connection between academic support and student perception of teacher relationships regarding staff recruitment. Teachers often report that they are motivated through the relationships they establish with their students (Spilt et al., 2012; Virat, 2022; Yoon, 2002), and the connection that teachers establish with their students can serve as a motivating factor for teachers considering a school, especially early in their career. Should the Principal successfully reduce administrative burdens from their staff, there is potential for higher levels of staff retention within the school as teachers can dedicate more time to developing positive relationships with students and mentoring and supporting new and junior colleagues (Leugers, 2018). Further to this, teachers need to also be aware of the strong relationships formed by engaging with more intent with their students' academic achievement. This can have a positive impact on not only student outcomes, but also overall job satisfaction.

Implications for Policy

As a highly regulated industry, school-based education is dependent upon government decisions. There are numerous examples of government policies acting against the interests of schools in regional areas (Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Cuervo, 2014; Halsey, 2018). however, by identifying the connection between academic support and teacher relationships in regional schools; there is an opportunity to make some positive changes. Halsey (2018) identified a need for increased government support for placement opportunities in regional areas to encourage early career teachers to consider relocating for employment (Handal et al., 2018; Richards, 2012; Trinidad et al., 2014). By providing preservice teachers and early career teachers with exposure to regional schools where academic support is a significant feature, there is the potential for early career teachers to feel engaged and motivated to commence their careers in regional schools.

A further policy initiative could be drawn from the development of the school climate measure. Departmental policies and programs that connect academic support initiatives within a school to student-teacher relationships through academic achievement could be developed. These

approaches effectively combat behavioural challenges in some rural schools in the United States (Ellis et al., 2022). With some focussed development, the potential exists for further development of similar initiatives in Australia with the consideration of school-community hub models being implemented more broadly.

Limitations and Implications for Research

Further research is required to test the model proposed in this study across multiple periods and with a larger sample size across both faith-based and non-faith-based schools. It is noted that the sample size is acceptable for the tests that have been deployed. However, a larger sample size across greater diversity of schools will enable greater model robustness and ultimately result in a more accurate model (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018). In addition, it is worth considering whether this model applies exclusively within the Australian context. Additional research in multiple countries and contexts would be beneficial to determine the model's efficacy on a global scale.

As the schools included in the broader project were all faith-based schools, applying the study design in non-faith-based schools could provide further confidence in the model's accuracy. McLure and Aldridge (2023) hypothesised that faith-based schools, explicitly Christian schools, have an additional layer of school culture that influences each domain. The potential exists for the model developed in this study to incorporate the measure developed by McLure and Aldridge to investigate the influence of religious belief in the school climate domains.

Additional research is also required to determine whether there is a connection between Academic Support, Teacher Relationships and School Satisfaction. Existing literature regarding school climate indicates connections between each domain and overall school satisfaction (Ellis et al., 2022; Zullig et al., 2011, 2021). However, this has not been tested for in this study. In addition, allowances have not been made in this study for differentiations between gender or ethnicity. This is primarily due to inadequate sample sizes – for this study to provide accurate results and demonstrate an appropriate model, there is a need to be as inclusive as possible. Therefore, non-binary genders and minority ethnicities could not be analysed in this study as the potential exists that these models and results would be inaccurate due to their small sample size (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018).

Conclusion

Utilising the Revised School Climate Measure (Zullig et al., 2015), this study has identified that student-teacher relationships appear stronger in regional schools due in part to the higher level of academic support provided by teachers in these schools. As teachers in regional schools navigate challenges associated with disadvantage due to geography, there is greater emphasis on their ability to differentiate instruction and provide individual support to help students achieve academically. This creates an inherent tension for teachers who must balance their own resource constraints, professional isolation, and increased workloads with the heightened needs of their students. Regional teachers often find themselves extending beyond traditional instructional roles to become academic mentors, pastoral care providers, and community liaisons - roles that both enhance and complicate their relationships with students.

The relationships between teachers and students in regional settings frequently transcend traditional classroom boundaries, extending into sporting activities, community events, and informal interactions within the broader community context. This multi-faceted connection appears to strengthen the academic support relationship, as teachers develop deeper understanding of their students' lived experiences and circumstances. However, this expanded relationship scope also presents challenges for teachers in maintaining professional boundaries while remaining accessible and supportive, particularly in small communities where they may regularly encounter students and their families outside of school hours.

This degree of academic support, coupled with the broader community-embedded nature of teacher-student relationships, positively influences student perceptions of their relationships with their teachers. However, the sustainability of these intensive support relationships deserves further investigation, particularly regarding teacher wellbeing and burnout risk. Future research activities in this area are needed to test the veracity of the model with a larger sample size and in different contexts outside of Australia, while also examining the long-term implications of these expanded teacher-student relationships for both parties.

Acknowledgements

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Growing our own: A Community-led Approach to Building a Local Health Workforce

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Abstract

Rural and regional Australia faces significant healthcare challenges, exacerbated by chronic workforce shortages and limited access to higher education opportunities. Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (Uni Hub) has undertaken a community-led initiative to address these gaps growing in our local health workforce. Established in 2019, Uni Hub delivers support for regional students pursuing university qualifications, focusing on locally delivered, industry-relevant education that meets the specific needs of regional communities.

By partnering with universities, schools, and health networks, Uni Hub has grown from a single study centre with 15 students to five campuses supporting over 500 students, including more than 100 in health-related fields. Since 2019, Uni Hub has supported 16 local nursing and social work graduates, with an additional 70 graduates projected by 2027. Uni Hub's model combines a whole-of-workforce perspective with dedicated student support services, including academic tutoring, placement coordination, and career guidance, ensuring students can succeed.

Key to Uni Hub's success is its focus on partnerships and advocacy. Collaborations with universities have increased accessibility to health qualifications, while persistent engagement with government has secured investment in regional training facilities. The initiative demonstrates a strengths-based, place-based approach, addressing critical workforce shortages while empowering local students to transform their communities. Growing a regional health workforce is complex, but Uni Hub's model demonstrates that sustainable, community-driven solutions are achievable and impactful.

Keywords: *rural health workforce, nursing, community-led, allied health, social work*

Background

Australia's rural and regional communities face unique healthcare challenges, compounded by longstanding workforce shortages (National Rural Health Alliance, 2023). Addressing these gaps requires targeted, place-based solutions that support the development of a sustainable local workforce (Gillespie et al., 2022). Ongoing regional health workforce shortages are well documented (Kumar et al., 2020; National Rural Heal Alliance, 2023; Russell et al., 2021). Ten years ago, the Spencer Gulf cities recognised that a new approach was needed to grow the regional workforce. The Spencer Gulf region has high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, intergenerational unemployment, and decades of underinvestment in higher education (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023; King et al., 2022). Uni Hub Spencer

Gulf (Uni Hub) regions have vocational qualifications on par with the nation, but there has been a persistent and significant gap in attaining university qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2024). While 32% of Australians aged 15–74 years have completed a bachelor's degree or higher, only 9% in our region have done so (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2024; King et al., 2022). Despite online access to university, only 4.5% of our population are currently studying at university compared to 15% nationally (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e; King et al., 2022). The old way of doing things was not working. A different, more proactive, and empowering approach was needed.

A Local Solution

Uni Hub emerged from an alliance of business, community, local government, and educational leaders who saw that access to locally delivered, industry-relevant tertiary education was critical to the future health workforce and economic sustainability of this region. Uni Hub is a community-owned not-for-profit, funded through the federal government's Regional University Study Hubs program. The study hubs program aims to enable students in rural, regional, and remote Australia to pursue higher education while staying in their communities (Stone et al., 2022).

In 2019, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf opened with one study centre and 15 students. In 2024, there are five campuses in regional and remote South Australia—in Port Lincoln, Port Augusta, Roxby Downs, Port Pirie, and Kadina on Barngarla, Nukunu, Kokatha, and Nharangga Countries. Figure 1 shows Uni Hub locations. Uni Hub supports over 500 students, with more than 100 studying health-related degrees. Sixteen social work and nursing students have graduated and started work in local health services. Figure 2 shows 2024 graduates, including nursing students. An estimated additional 60 nurses, eight social workers, and two psychologists or counsellors will graduate and be working locally by the end of 2027.

Figure 1: *Uni Hub Locations in South Australia*

Figure 2: *2024 Graduates, Including 13 Nursing Students*

Uni Hub supports students in pursuing higher education locally in courses which meet regional industry demands. The primary objective is to retain skilled individuals within regional areas, addressing critical workforce shortages. Uni Hub facilitates partnerships with universities who are committed to delivering qualifications that specifically target regional workforce needs, including those in nursing and allied health. A core component of Uni Hub's operational strategy involves substantial investment in local industry and school engagement, supporting a sustainable pipeline of students that includes recent school graduates as well as individuals seeking to upskill or reskill.

Critically, Uni Hub provides focused support for regional students, offering face-to-face assistance and ensuring holistic care. This support encompasses course selection, enrolment and orientation guidance, academic tutoring, coordination of placements and residential schools, exam invigilation, and organisation of annual graduation ceremonies. A significant proportion of Uni Hub students are first in family to attend university. For many, access to this local support is essential; without it, our students tell us they would be unlikely to pursue higher education due to financial, social, and logistical barriers that prevent relocation to Adelaide or independent online study from home.

Key Components to Growing our own Health Workforce

Whole-of-Workforce Perspective

Uni Hub conducted regional stakeholder consultations including: an industry skills shortage survey in 2019 and in 2022, a further survey of more than 30 schools and 80 employers, and a heavy industry workforce summit in 2023 with more than 100 participants. Although the summit was not focused on health, it was understood that any regional growth requires a corresponding growth in the health workforce (South Australian Council of Social Service, 2024). The consultations explored the extent of professional and skilled workforce shortages, the tertiary

study and support required to meet those needs, barriers for employment or study, and the need to explore local solutions to bring employers, schools, and tertiary providers closer. The data gathered through the surveys and summit indicated growing a local health workforce was critical to community wellbeing and the regional economy.

Actions Reflect Regional Needs

Schools and businesses shared challenges including low visibility of career opportunities, lack of relevant career advice in schools, irrelevant marketing by city-based universities, and complex pathways between school, vocational education and training, university, and work. Health care and social assistance were identified as critical workforce shortage areas. An opportunity emerged for Uni Hub to facilitate increased study options, coordination of health career and study information, increased visibility of hidden careers, and awareness of health qualifications and pathways. Uni Hub is now working with more than 40 schools to raise aspiration to higher education, connect students, schools, and employers, and to showcase healthcare careers. Further, Uni Hub has hosted career events for schools and the wider community, in partnership with local health networks and health-related employers.

Partnerships

Based on the survey results, Uni Hub established a partnership with CQUniversity for nursing qualifications. Between 2019 and 2021, students were required to travel to Queensland for residential schools and placements, which was a barrier for many. Uni Hub and CQUniversity worked together to address this and in 2021, CQUniversity changed the location of residential schools and placement from Queensland to South Australia. Nursing student numbers doubled within 12 months. We partner with Flinders University for social work and allied health degrees. In 2024, Flinders University launched three new allied health degrees offered face-to-face to regional students in three South Australian locations, one of which is Uni Hub Spencer Gulf. The first cohort of 10 students began in February, with four local allied health professionals employed by the university as academic staff.

Local partnerships are central to effectiveness. Uni Hub actively works with local health networks and health service providers. The conversion rate from university to regional employment as registered nurses or social workers to date is 100%.

Dedicated Support

A central question guiding our efforts is: How effectively are we preparing students for success? In regional settings, building a health workforce pipeline extends beyond simply encouraging residents to enrol in local programs. Comprehensive support systems are essential to help students achieve strong academic performance, access available resources, persevere through challenges, and ultimately graduate and transition into the workforce. Uni Hub provides a range of targeted support services for students in health-related programs, including local academic tutors, and specialised course tutors in nursing, allied health, and social work, supplementing university-provided tutoring. Study Hub managers support with application and enrolment and provide networking sessions to connect students with potential employers and placement providers. Additionally, a dedicated coordinator offers support specifically for nursing and allied health students. Further, Uni Hub offers financial support through a scholarship program.

Lessons Learned

Uni Hub has adopted a growth-oriented, strengths-based approach. Recognising that initial strategies may not always succeed, we analyse outcomes to refine our practices. We draw inspiration from our students, who demonstrate creativity and resilience in overcoming obstacles. To effectively encourage individuals to pursue university education and healthcare

careers locally, we have adapted our communication strategies. Our messaging on available support is now designed to be consistent, multi-channel, and easily accessible, ensuring that prospective students are well-informed about the resources available to facilitate their educational journey.

Persistent advocacy to universities and government is also vital. Regional Uni Study Hubs play a key role in supporting students through their qualification; thus, funding remains an essential part of what we do. Since 2019, Uni Hub has collaborated with local health partners, students, and MPs, advocating for a clinical simulation training space to be established in one of our regional hospitals. This year the state health budget includes allocation for a purpose-built training facility in our region, for use by health services and students studying health-care university qualifications locally (Government of South Australia, 2024).

Regional communities need local health services and continue to struggle to meet the need (Gillespie et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2020). A new approach is needed (National Rural Health Alliance, 2024). Growing our own health professionals supports better outcomes for the communities we care about (National Rural Health Alliance, 2023). Our regional health workforce cannot be grown by one organisation alone, we are one piece of a complex puzzle (Gillespie et al., 2022). Uni Hub contributes to solutions and makes a local difference. Each local student supported to study, graduate, and gain employment has an impact on our community – and that is what we're here for.

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Growing our own: Connecting Schools, Employers, Careers and Study Pathways in Regional South Australia

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Abstract

Uni Hub Spencer Gulf's *Career Partnership* initiative addresses persistently low levels of aspiration and engagement with tertiary education in North and Western South Australia. Research, census data, and consultations with schools and employers revealed that this issue is negatively impacting workforce capacity and community development, with challenges expected to escalate in coming years.

Key barriers include a lack of locally relevant career advice, limited awareness of available careers in the region, and increasingly complex pathways between school, vocational education, university, and work. Outreach efforts by city-based universities were often irrelevant and uncoordinated, further compounding the problem.

In response, Uni Hub developed the 'Grow our Own' Partnerships Plan to deliver targeted initiatives addressing these barriers. Annual career expos in regional centres will showcase career opportunities and study pathways, with a focus on workforce shortages and locally available careers. Outreach programs to small communities will promote university study and available support through Regional University Centres. Industry immersion and taster programs will provide hands-on experience in professional and technical careers, particularly in heavy industry and the health care sectors.

Collaboration with secondary schools, employers, regional agencies, industry associations, and tertiary providers is central to the plan's success. By leveraging partnerships and resources, Uni Hub aims to address the region's workforce needs and build local capacity through the common goal of 'growing our own' skilled workforce.

Keywords: *aspiration, partnerships, engagement, community-led, pathways, rural regional and remote*

Background

Known for its stunning beaches, rugged coastlines and amazing scenery, the Eyre Peninsula is located on the west coast of South Australia, bordered by Spencer Gulf and the Southern Ocean (see Figure 1). Despite covering 23% of the state's land area, (Regional Development Australia, 2024) it is home to only 3.6% of the state's total population. With a significant investment pipeline and new jobs, regional and remote communities in South Australia's Eyre Peninsula and Spencer Gulf are set for significant growth (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024; Regional Development Australia Eyre Peninsula, 2022). However, a lack of a suitably skilled local workforce is a major

challenge (Australian Rural Health Alliance, 2023; Regional Development South Australia, 2021). Low qualification attainment levels, poor access to, and limited engagement with tertiary education opportunities further compounds the regions workforce challenges (King et al., 2022).

Figure 1: *Eyre Peninsula Coastline*

Looking at solutions to benefit industry and the local community, the Uni Hub Spencer Gulf took up the challenge. The Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (Uni Hub) is a community-led organisation with a focus on supporting regional and remote residents to access tertiary education without leaving their communities. A critical component of Uni Hub's strategy is ensuring that education opportunities align with local industry workforce gaps. Uni Hub partners with universities, local employers, industry, and schools to deliver locally relevant career expos, industry immersion programs, and community outreach activities. These separate yet interconnected activities aim to increase awareness and support engagement in education and employment pathways meeting local workforce needs.

A Local Solution

Uni Hub operates study hubs in five regional South Australian locations. Since its inception in 2019, it has been responsive to local industry and community needs. Thus, initiatives implemented or supported by this hub reflect both a strategic regional and a local community need. In 2019 and 2022 Uni Hub undertook stakeholder surveys to better understand industry needs and community perceptions and expectations about local education and employment pathways. In 2023, it facilitated a heavy industry workforce summit to determine the scope of needs and support required to address skilled workforce shortages. More than 200 schools, small and large businesses, and community organisations participated in the surveys or summit. The community highlighted barriers to education and meeting industry workforce gaps, including low awareness of career options, career advice in schools that was not locally specific, irrelevant information from city-based universities, and overly complex pathways between school, further education, and employment. The information gathered through stakeholder engagement has

informed Uni Hub's overarching strategy: To facilitate better coordination of study and career pathway information, improve awareness of hidden career options, and Increase knowledge of local tertiary study options supported by Uni Hub. Actions in each regional centre vary depending on need.

Uni Hub secured federal government funding through the Regional University Study Hubs Partnership Program to implement the partnership-based initiative to facilitate activities responding to community needs. Uni Hub partnered with local schools, Regional Development Australia, Local Health Networks, Local Jobs Program, and local businesses. In 2024, inaugural annual career expos were held. They enabled school students and the wider community to be exposed to the range of local careers and study options available. *Explore*, an industry immersion program for school students was a central part of this partnerships initiative. With the assistance of local industry, training providers and the tertiary education sector, programs were developed to provide intensive exposure to careers that currently exist and ones that will grow into the future. The final piece to the puzzle was to deliver school and community outreach across the wider region, increasing awareness across small communities of the service and support available to them via the local Uni Hub. The aim is then to encourage residents that it is possible to study higher education in a highly supported manner and pursue their career goals from within their local community.

Key Components to Growing our own

Annual Career Expos

Uni Hub hosted a series of career 'roadshow' expos throughout 2024, facilitating valuable connections between employers, school leavers, job seekers and career changers. The events highlighted regional careers, higher education, training and employment opportunities. Knowledge of pathways and careers can influence aspirations and choices (Fray et al., 2020). Additionally, many careers are often overlooked due to a lack of visible, relatable role models (Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2020). By including a diverse range of exhibitors who provided immersive and interactive experiences, the career expo provided residents with information, choice, and direct access to employers. For example, a Bachelor of Nursing Student registered with the Uni Hub Port Lincoln connected with a local health provider at the event and was successful in gaining employment with that provider whilst they study. This highlights the reciprocal benefits of the expo. Participation in the expo provided local businesses an opportunity to connect with potential employees, fill their workforce gaps, and promote professions within their industry that may not often be a career of choice.

Within the career expo, career and study breakout sessions provided attendees with detailed information on study options, including traineeship and apprenticeship pathways. Each session also offered opportunity for questions, facilitated by a panel of experts including health care professionals, university representatives, traineeship providers, and employers. Care was taken to ensure panel members were relatable and local. For example, one panel member began their career as an apprentice and is now a business owner employing the next generation of apprentices. School and community members attending the career expo provided feedback that the expo was valuable for the region. A local parent shared via a feedback form: "*As a Port Lincoln local with a teenage daughter, I never knew we had such a range of opportunities. Awesome event and very well organised*". The principal of the remote Leigh Creek Area School noted in their feedback form:

> *The only problem I have now is that you have opened a can of worms! I had students who were set in their ways, that are now looking in different directions because of the availability of different sectors. Some students didn't even realise that there were certain jobs. Despite the worms, it is a very good space to be in.*

The inaugural expos will become a fixture on school, industry and community calendars to ensure their continued success and strong support.

'Explore'—An Industry Immersion and Taster Program

A critical component of Uni Hub's strategy is to be responsive to local needs and nuances. Hence, an industry immersion event called *Explore* was developed to provide an insight into real-world work environments. This initiative brought together over 40 businesses and service providers with the aim of providing Year 9 and 10 students with personalised learning experiences tailored to their interests and career goals. Additionally, it complemented the information provided at the career expo, increasing understanding about career options and pathways. A program with 150 interactive sessions across 3 days was developed offering students a wide variety to choose from. Sessions were offered in small groups to ensure that students and presenter were able to genuinely engage (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: *'Explore' Highlights*

Sessions included being a print journalist, a radio presenter, launching a rocket or finding out what it is like to be a skipper on a fishing vessel in the simulator. Other sessions included a visit to an aged care facility, and a virtual reality tour of a hydrogen plant. Students were able to participate in activities not normally available in their smaller communities. 490 students from 15 schools from across the Eyre Peninsula attended, with some schools travelling over 5 hours each way (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Participating School Locations*
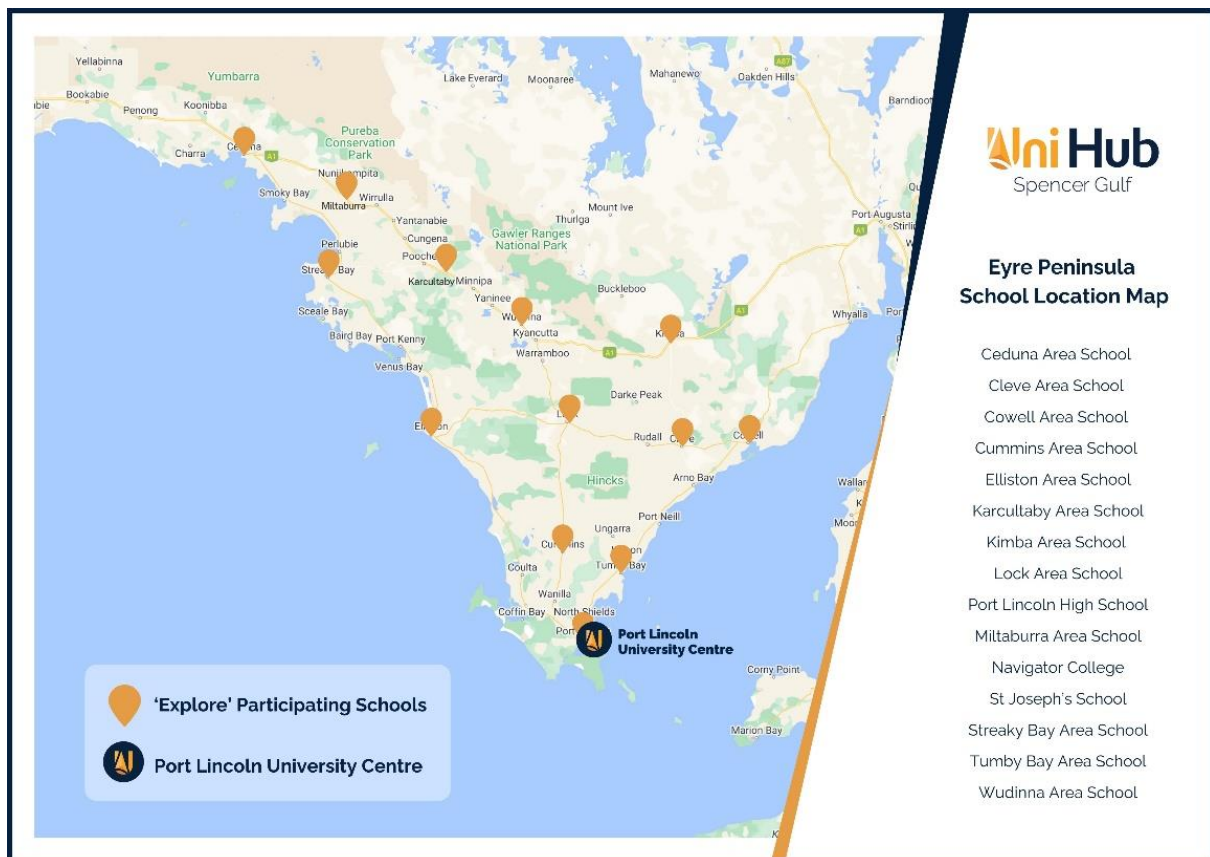
Like the career expos, *Explore* provided benefits across the community. The event facilitated a community-wide approach to local workforce development, creating valuable connections between students, educators, and industry leaders. In *Explore* feedback forms, a student at Tumby Bay Area School said there "*were job opportunities I didn't know existed*" and local employers expressed their perception of value:

> *I loved seeing the students engage. Having curious learners arrive, bravely and jump into an immersive challenge with strangers was great. I feel they learnt a lot and so did I.*

With feedback demonstrating the value, the *Explore* event has now become an annual fixture for schools in the region.

The way Ahead

To increase awareness of and encourage tertiary education as an option within the wider community, Uni Hub is developing a series of university 'taster' programs that provide a firsthand glimpse into university and professional pathways. In collaboration with university and industry partners, it aims to facilitate alternative entry pathways, micro-credentials, and skill sets tailored for professional and technical careers that are in-demand locally. These initiatives will give individuals with practical job-ready skills and facilitate access to university. By offering hands-on experiences, it will enable exploration of various career paths, empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their futures and futureproofing our communities.

School and Community Outreach

Uni Hub staff are embedded in the community and understand the challenges of accessing services and information while living in regional or remote areas. Whilst there are similarities in challenges experienced by regional and remote schools and communities, it is well known that a

'one size fits all' approach does not work. Outreach services are established through partnerships with local councils and in consultation with key industry, school and community members (see Figure 4). Currently, Uni Hub teams provide monthly outreach to smaller regional towns, at the request of local councils. Through personal communication, students have shared their experiences:

> *As a student living rurally it is often hard finding a way to start a degree and be able to study while still living at home. Uni Hub has made that experience an absolute breeze and I will be forever grateful for their services. (Ceduna student, 2024)*

In doing this, Uni Hub contributes to community-led solutions to growing their own workforce. Uni Hub's partnership initiative focuses on making education and career options accessible in regional and remote communities. By facilitating community-led and responsive initiatives, our programs enable students to explore possibilities and support them make informed choices about their futures. With future investments into the region leading to thousands of new jobs, the career expos, industry immersion initiatives, and community outreach aim to increase awareness of options and contribute to our community growing our own workforce (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024; Regional Development Australia Eyre Peninsula, 2022).

Figure 4: *University Centres and Outreach Sites*
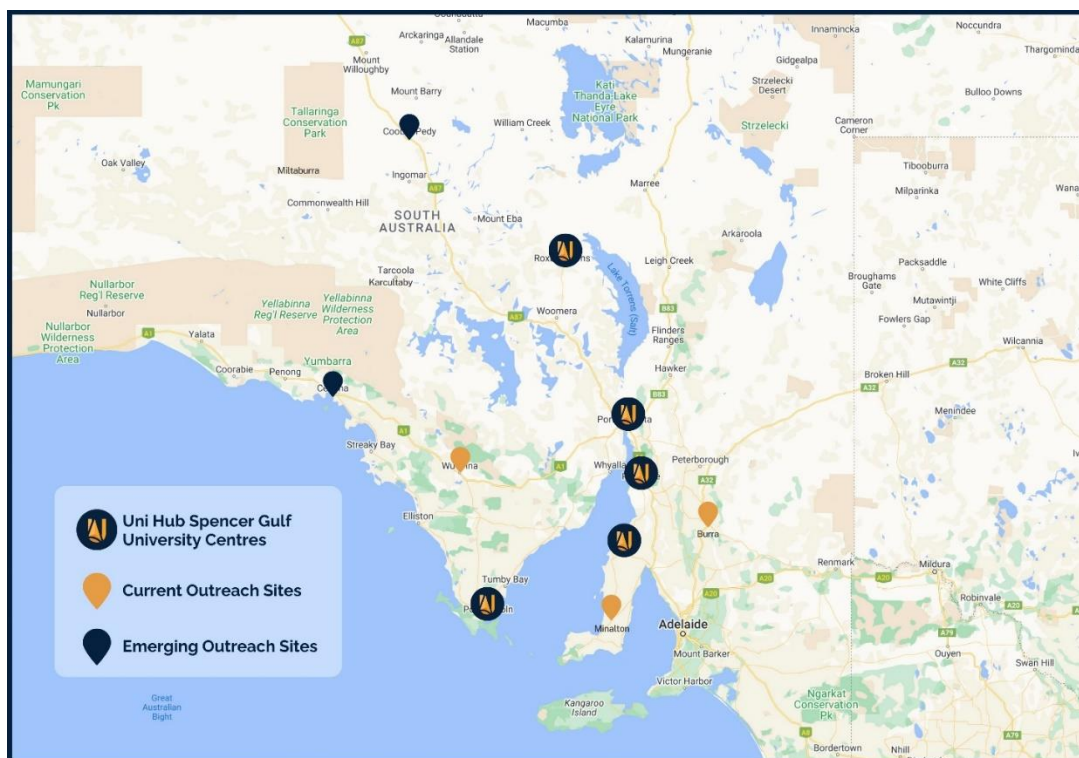
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Empowering Remote Communities Through Education: The Roxby Downs Early Childhood Pilot Project

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Abstract

The Roxby Downs Early Childhood Pilot Project was designed to address a critical shortage of qualified early childhood educators in the remote mining town of Roxby Downs, South Australia. This shortage impacts not only early childhood services but also workforce participation and overall community stability. In collaboration with BHP, the Roxby Downs Children's Centre, and CQUniversity, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf developed a blended learning model that allows residents to complete a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care through a combination of flexible online coursework and practical, hands-on training. This initiative helped participants gain qualifications while directly contributing to the needs of their community. The paper explores how workforce shortages in remote areas can be addressed through locally adapted, creative solutions, the value of building strong partnerships between industry and education to create sustainable workforce models and the impact of blended learning in supporting local workforce development and community.

Keywords: *early childhood, remote community, training, industry-education partnership*

Introduction

This article provides an analysis of the positive impact that local tertiary education institutions can have in rural, regional and remote communities, with a focus on early childhood provision. Rural, regional, and remote communities report a lack of qualified childcare workers, impacting childcare availability and broader economic participation (Morris, 2024). Residents of the remote South Australian town of Roxby Downs identified a need for accessible, childcare specific Vocational Education and Training. Facilitated by the Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (Uni Hub), the Roxby Early Childhood Pilot Project (Early Childhood Project) has delivered this. Uni Hub is a community-owned network of five Regional University Study Hubs operating across the north and west of South Australia. Uni Hub Spencer Gulf supports regional students to access Higher Education and delivers tailored projects to address local workforce needs. (King et al, 2022) Uni Hub's 'Grow our Own' strategy connects community to tertiary education and industry; filling workforce gaps in the region and helping people stay in their hometown while pursuing their career and educational goals. Uni Hub staff live in the region and understand firsthand the challenges experienced by the Roxby Downs community. The community is innovative, resilient, and willing to have a go, which is demonstrated throughout this project. The pilot project has supported

participants to gain qualifications while directly contributing to the workforce needs of the community.

Research Context

Early childhood education sets children up for lifelong learning and overall wellbeing, and is crucial for children's future success (Government of South Australia, 2023; Morris, 2024). However, regional, rural and remote communities often lack childcare facilities and qualified educators (Government of South Australia, 2023). Roxby Downs is a remote mining town located 566 km north of Adelaide and is home to 3,976 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Roxby Downs has a relatively stable population, although experiences annual inflow/outflow, due to the transient nature of a mining workforce (Municipal Council of Roxby Downs, 2023). Over recent years, residents in Roxby Downs reported a critical shortage of qualified Early Childhood Educators (Regional Development Australia Far North, 2024). The Roxby Downs Children's Centre (the Centre) was established in January 2012 as a multifunctional centre. The Centre provides long day care, kindergarten, outside school hour's care and vacation care and is licensed for 170 children; however, it has only been able to accommodate 140, with over 100 children consistently on the waitlist (M. Waters, personal communication, 2024). Lack of qualified staff has impeded the Centre's ability to increase their capacity and meet regulatory staff-to-child ratios (M. Waters, personal communication, 2024). The shortage of early childhood educators has impacted childcare services and overall workforce participation, community stability, and local economic development (BHP, 2023; Regional Development Australia Far North, 2024).

In Figure 1 we show the distance between Roxby Downs and Adelaide, capital city of South Australia. This map shows the vast distances that can perpetuate geographical inequalities affecting communities differently (Cuervo, 2014: Webb et al, 2024).

Figure 2 shows the entry to the community of Roxby Downs, while Figure 3 shows participants working together on course work and stakeholders involved in the project.
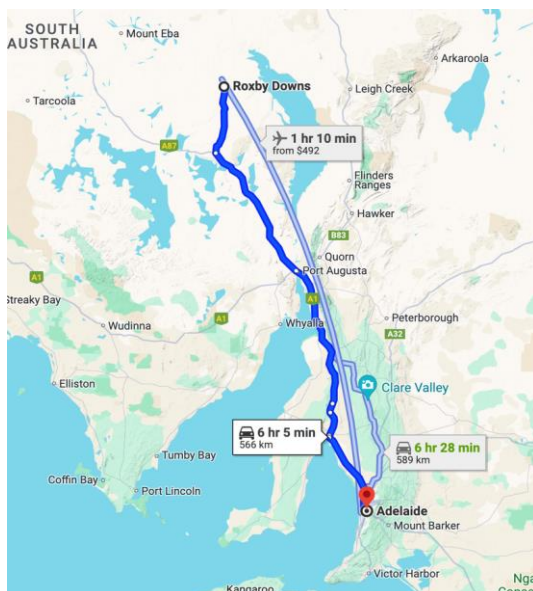
Figure 1: *Map of South Australia*   **Figure 2**: *Entry to Roxby Downs*

Figure 3: *Participants and Stakeholders*

A Local Solution

In early 2022 Uni Hub was approached by the Centre and BHP to find a sustainable solution to the childcare crisis. In collaboration with BHP, the Centre, and CQUniversity Australia, Uni Hub developed an initiative to address the crisis. In 2023, the Roxby Downs Early Childhood Pilot Project was launched. The project delivers a blended learning model that enables residents to complete a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care through a combination of flexible, online coursework and practical, local, hands-on training and support.

Key Components of the Approach

Place-based Collaboration

With Uni Hub Spencer Gulf staff living and working in the town since 2021, they were aware of employment challenges experienced at the Centre. Locals wanting to enter the childcare sector shared their frustration at the lack of training providers, costs, and restrictions on subsidies. Through informal conversations, Uni Hub staff gained an understanding of how the childcare shortage was affecting families and the wider community. The reality of these shortages meant many parents were unable to return to work or pursue study. Local industry and workplaces were unable to recruit or retain a stable workforce, with the lack of suitable childcare being cited as the main challenge. These insights shaped the direction of the project, ensuring it addressed the practical needs of the town.

This approach underscores the vital role that Regional University Study Hubs play in supporting local workforce development (King et al., 2022). These Study Hubs are embedded in their communities, allowing them to identify issues early, build trust, and co-create solutions that are relevant and sustainable. RUSHs are well-positioned to drive long-term, community-led growth across regional and remote areas.

Strategic Partnerships

It was crucial to engage a registered training organisation (RTO) to partner with Uni Hub and a partner to support with funding. Uni Hub explored South Australian-based public and private RTOs. However, it proved difficult to secure an RTO willing to deliver to very small cohorts or to students living in a remote location. After looking further afield, Uni Hub connected an existing university partner, CQUniversity Australia to the initiative. Strategic partnerships set the pilot up

for success, with CQUniversity delivering the vocational training, BHP demonstrating commitment through funding, and Uni Hub supporting students.

Persistent Problem Solving

There were complexities and resourcing implications that needed to be overcome, including modification of internal student support processes and reporting systems. Additionally, approvals for accessing subsidised training and compliance reporting for vocational education differ between Queensland and South Australia. Thus, it was necessary for partners in the pilot to meet regularly and find ways to problem solve, keeping an eye on objective of the initiative.

Community Engagement

With funding secured from BHP for the pilot and CQUniversity committed to deliver the training, the next step was to engage with the community to build understanding and interest in the pilot program. A marketing campaign was launched, inviting residents to complete an expression of interest. Each person was contacted and offered an opportunity to attend a 'meet and greet' at the Centre. This was an important step for participants, providing a firsthand opportunity to experience the environment in which they would be training and potentially working. As a result, several participants decided early childhood education was not for them, while many remained enthusiastic.

Information Sharing and Accessible Supports for Participants

The next stage was for participants to meet with the Centre director and Uni Hub project lead, providing an opportunity to understand about each potential student and their motivations. Additionally, it enabled the students to learn about the regulatory environment of the sector, the requirement for 160 hours of unpaid placement, and the study hours needed to complete the qualification. Once the initial screening checks were completed, participants undertook an upfront assessment of needs to determine their eligibility for the course. Uni Hub facilitated group sessions for the testing, providing support to students during the process.

Once enrolments were confirmed, Uni Hub provided face-to-face orientation sessions in collaboration with CQUniversity. These sessions assisted students to navigate the online learning portal, ensure they understood the placement requirements and had the documentation and approvals needed to commence. Students were encouraged to approach the Centre to arrange times for their placement. This was an important experience to improve practical skills in workplace communication, employer interviewing techniques and proactively engaging in the workplace on-boarding process.

Formal student assessments included written assignments, virtual observations and third-party reporting. Weekly face-to-face and online support sessions provided participants with assistance. Regular contact with the Centre enabled check-ins on student progress and early intervention of potential barriers to success. Students were given access to the Roxby Downs Innovation Hub, a community co-working space where they could study, collaborate and support each other.

Outcomes

Of the 21 expressions of interest received, 10 students commenced and four withdrew. Four of the six continuing students have completed their qualification at the time of writing. Figure 4 details student data.

Figure 4: *Student Data*

Roxby Downs Pilot Participant Journey
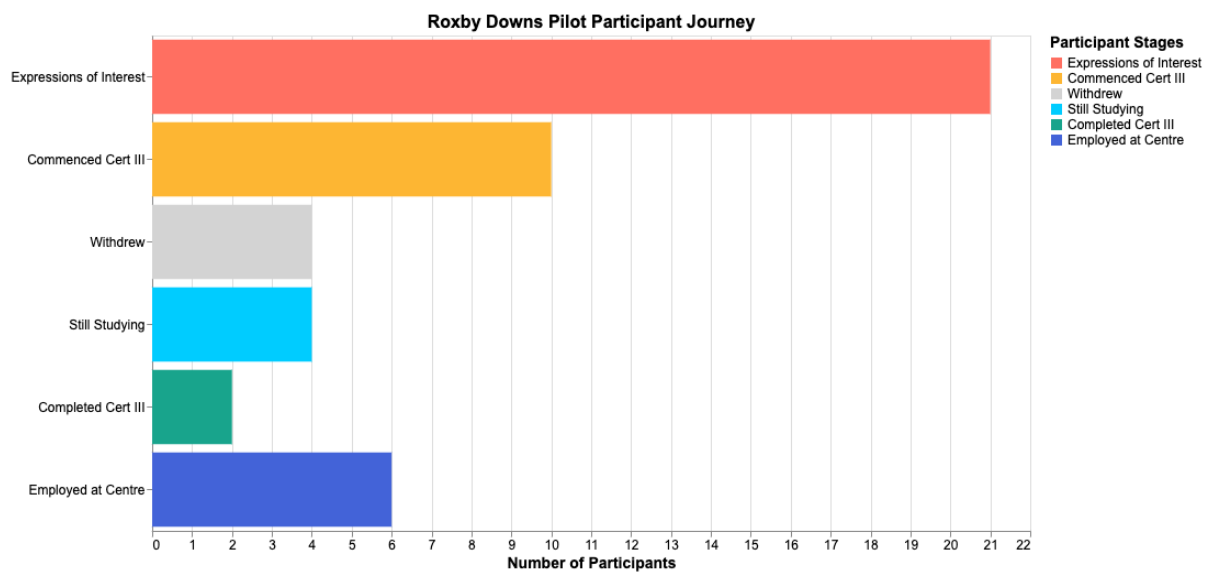
Successes

As a result of the success of the project an additional six educators are now employed at the Centre which has contributed to a reduction in wait list numbers from more than 100, down to 76 (M. Waters, personal communication, 2024). Building a local skilled workforce builds aspiration for youth potentially reducing displacement and migration as well as providing career pathways for an existing workforce.

The Centre is now well equipped to facilitate the South Australian Government's introduction of three-year old pre-school (M. Waters, personal communication, 2024). Furthermore, current staff of the Centre now understand how to access VET training to upskill with support from the Regional University Study Hub to move into leadership and mentor roles and meet the ongoing academic demands of the Early Childhood Educator role. Discussions are underway to continue delivery of the Early Childhood Project with ongoing financial support from BHP.

Lessons Learned

By recognising that local co-design, collaboration and relationships are critical to the success of community-based projects, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf maintained a focus on mutually beneficial outcomes for the community, CQ University, BHP and the Centre. Unforeseen challenges were overcome with a responsive and flexible approach, and by maintaining practical and realistic expectations for the pilot project. The attention paid to each student facilitated a positive, immersive learning experience which will encourage future participation. There is value in starting small and realising that even a small number of local graduates can have a significant impact, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities. Serving as role models, successful local graduates inspire younger generations, demonstrating the value of education and the possibility of building a career locally (Gao et al., 2022).

Capacity Building in Regional, Rural and Remote Communities

Building the capacity of an existing workforce and creating pathways for individuals, contributes to the retention of knowledge and skills in regional, rural and remote communities. This initiative recognises the importance of major employers in regional and remote areas and seeks to create place-based solutions for growing local workforces (Kilpatrick et, al., 2023).

Considerations for Policymakers in Supporting Regional, Rural and Remote Communities Through Regional University Study Hubs

The initial success of the pilot project suggests that it could be replicated and tailored to the needs of other regional, rural and remote communities, enabling expansion of the catchment area for delivery in the future. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the Roxby Downs Early Childhood project will be undertaken to facilitate continuous improvement.

Conclusion

High-quality early childhood education is crucial for fostering lifelong learning, wellbeing and success for individual children and their wider community (Government of South Australia, 2023). Although Halsey noted the need to examine access to training providers in regional, rural and remote locations (Halsey, 2018), these communities still experience inequity of access to educational opportunities (Morris, 2024). The community of Roxby Downs identified a need to increase the number of qualified early childhood educators (Regional Development Australia Far North, 2023). By developing a collaborative, place-based approach, the Early Childhood project delivered practical and significant positive outcomes for the Centre and for the broader Roxby Downs community. Uni Hub's facilitation of this project, building a mutually beneficial collaboration with BHP, the Centre, and CQUniversity, has led to increased early childhood education places in Roxby Downs, benefitting children and their parents while simultaneously addressing critical workforce needs.

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Book Review: Zhao, Y., Liu, J. (Eds.). (2024) Rural School Improvement in Developing Countries. Springer Nature.

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Abstract

Rural School Improvement in Developing Countries edited by Yuchi Zhao and Jing Liu, examines rural school improvement programs implemented in four developing countries, including China, Myanmar, Uganda, and Kenya (noting that while China is not a developing country, it has rural regions that could be comparable to the other regions discussed). The book analyses research questions related to problems faced by rural schools in these countries, approaches or models adopted to improve these rural schools, specific interventions to address the problems and their effectiveness, and lessons learnt from these programs. The book is 'open access', which makes it an accessible reference for anyone wanting background information about international rural education policies and strategies.

Keywords: *rural school improvement, developing countries, educational policy, educational strategies, educational systems, educational structures, teacher training.*

Introduction

Rural School Improvement in Developing Countries comprises four case studies drawn from China, Myanmar, Uganda and Kenya together with an insightful globally based introduction and recommendations for ongoing policy and practice.

Before proceeding further with the review, it is important to draw attention to an anomaly in the title of the book and the countries under consideration. China is a huge economic, political and cultural powerhouse with world leading development achievements and aspirations compared to Myanmar, Uganda and Kenya. China is not a developing country especially when compared to the other case studies. The editors (and authors) do specify, however, that the China case study focuses on "*27 rural and remote counties which are considered some of the poorest [in the country]*" (p. 39). A critical factor then that readers need to bear in mind when comparing and contrasting each of the case studies, is the potential quantum, quality and diversity of resources of both hard and soft kinds for the China case study to draw upon.

The publication is a SpringersBriefs in Education edited by Yuchi Zhao and Jing Liu, both of Beijing Normal University. Each of the case studies uses a similar structure. There is a comprehensive list of abbreviations to aid reading and understanding. As well, extensive use of tables, diagrams and dimensional data is used throughout which adds to the utility and impact of the publication. This, notwithstanding that in some instances, authors have had to use best estimates in relation to student populations, compositions and achievements.

The publication is an output from the World Education Forum held in May 2015 in Korea under the leadership of UNESCO and priorities for a common education agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals out to 2030.

The question, why rural education is right up front, leaving readers in no doubt as to the seminal—indeed dire—importance of "*ensur(ing) equitable and inclusive quality education for lifelong learning for all by 2030*" (p. v). When the 2015 World Education Forum was held, more than 50% of the world's population lived in rural areas and a large percentage of children and youth were educated in rural schools. Also, "*rural populations represented 70% of the world's poor and 72% of the population of the least developed countries*" (p. 2). Salient characteristics and constraints of rural contexts which impact on schools and the education they can provide, help frame the studies such as geographical isolation, often limited and tenuous economic opportunities, and population outflow and residualisation. Added to these in some instances, is the complex role of rural schools during and following periods of armed conflict and insurgency activity.

Chapter one presents a review of school improvement in rural settings with an emphasis on research and practice. A key feature of the chapter is the discussion of the history and consequences of school effectiveness and school improvement, namely "*While school effectiveness was focused on finding what schools needed change in order to become more effective, school improvement was focused on finding out how schools could change in order to improve*" (p.5, emphasis added). In my experience, often the distinctiveness of the 'whats' and 'how's of education become blurred leading to a diminution of their utility. Definitions by Fontana and Frey (2005, p.698) are very helpful here: "*[how is] the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life*" and "*the traditional whats... [are] the activities of everyday life*". Two dot point boxes for school effectiveness summarise key points including "*best bets, worst bets, and promising bets*", a pithy way of driving messages home.

Chapter two focuses on a joint China-UK project aimed at improving the achievements of students in basic education in some of China's poorest rural and remote counties. The aim of the project was to change the dominant pedagogical practices from transmission of knowledge and rote learning to one which placed greater emphasis on student centred approaches aimed at fostering creativity, learning by doing and collaboration. The case study foregrounds the many 'root and branch' changes and consequences for teachers, educational leaders, systems officers such as school inspectors and communities more broadly, that flowed from embracing this fundamental shift to teaching and learning.

The authors conclude the evaluation of the project an overall success with several key provisos for any scaling up, which readers will likely be familiar with from other similar studies and/or their own experiences. They include the need for

> *genuine ownership and leadership at all levels and the sustainability of the reform. It was recognised in the roll out of the project that the human process of developing ownership, strengthening new behaviours, and changing systems needed to be done at county-by-county, township-by-township, and school-by-school levels. Sustainable education outcomes will not be achieved merely by reproducing successful, but individual, projects like SBEP [southwest basic education project], but by aligning them with the broader context of educational reform. (p. 58)*

Myanmar is the next case study in the publication, a country of great ethnic diversity, a long history of military and disputed rule, very low average incomes, and chronic student underachievement. Reforming pedagogy sits at the heart of the efforts to drive change and achieve better learning outcomes. The rationale for 'making things better' include ensuring that the future workers of Myanmar are comparably well educated and trained so that development opportunities will not be lost to other countries, thereby exacerbating entrenched poverty.

Quoting the authors:

> *Reforms in the education sector at the outset of QBEP [Quality Basic Education Program] were being driven by a combination of factors, including a desire on the part of the government and donor partners to demonstrate the transformation of the education system, build credibility in the international community and amongst Myanmar's population with growing popular demand for improved education quality and its fears that other ASEAN nations were producing an educated workforce that would compete more favourably for work within Myanmar. (p. 69)*

One contribution of the case study, perhaps unintended, is rendering visible the number of organisations and their respective modes of operation, resourcing, accountability expectations, apparently required to drive improvement in basic education. The immense amount of detail provided tends to create an information fog that blankets out the essential messages and processes for driving change.

The Kenya case study commences with key characteristics and population data confronting driving improvements in access to quality basic education for all. Pressures of poverty, food insecurity, the ever-present prospect of malnourishment and starvation, and entrenched cultural practices which severely limit fulsome opportunities for all, make for very complex contexts and dynamics. At the time of writing the case study, 75% of Kenya's population lived in rural areas where built and utilities infrastructure are both often very problematic and official teacher- pupil ratios are aspirations rather than a day-to-day reality.

In 1980, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank encouraged—(forced?)—the Kenyan government to undergo structural adjustments to better control the economy and manage rising debt. Conceding best intentions, the effect of the changes according to the authors of the case study had severe implications for parents and families. In short, extra costs to have their children educated were transferred to them—a somewhat familiar story even in developed countries.

Notwithstanding the major "*impressive range of systemic reforms*" (p. 89) made by government, the provision of fundamental requirements for a basic education continued to be elusive. They included sufficient textbooks, classrooms with modest furniture and equipment, safe latrines and personal hygiene, and security.

Education for Marginalised Children in Kenya (EMACK) was "*designed to increase access to quality education opportunities for primary school children marginalized by cultural practices, conflict and poverty*" (p. 90). A later iteration, EMACK2, placed greater emphasis on rural and marginalised communities including (re) engaging parents in the education of their children. A consequence- likely unintended- of introducing Free Primary Education in 2003 was "*the belief that since the government had taken over the financing of education, parents had minimal or no role to play in education of their children*" (p. 90).

The authors report that the most effective reforms of EMACK2 occurred at school by school, teacher by teacher, community levels. In other words, school and community-based training and development. Financial sustainability loomed large (and continues to loom large in virtually every developing country) and challenged project leaders throughout their time with the initiative.

Improving the Quality of Rural Education Through Standard-Based Teacher Development and Management Reforms in Uganda is the fourth case study in this SpringersBriefs in Education publication. Key dimensional data in the opening section of the study—population size and growth rate, the huge proportion of youth (under 18) in the country which is 56% coupled with the long history of conflict and Uganda's landlocked location—help set the context for the programs as outlined. So too do the ongoing impacts of the health, economic, and social upheaval caused by AIDS. Engaging communities and community leaders, enhancing

coordination between government, donors and local schools and districts plus upskilling teachers and leaders are included in the case study.

Sustaining initiatives and programs beyond the first tranches of funding and support and imbedding them into ongoing governmental policy and practice is, as for other case studies, a major challenge. This challenge also resonates with what often prevails in developing countries once the first phase of resourcing and excitement about a 'new way to improve things', passes. As the authors argue,

> there needs to be a good understanding of the political, social, economic and cultural context in which the programme will operate, as 'best practices' cannot merely be transferred from one country to another. If programmes … are to be sustained in the education system once donor funding and international support is withdrawn they must also have a systemic impact. This suggests they need to impact on national policy and building capacity and be owned by the state institutions with clear role and responsibilities mapped out (p.107).

The heart of the final chapter is a call to shift the focus from improving access to education to improving the quality of education provision, of what happens inside the school fence, and that teachers are key to achieving this. Six fields of policy and practice reform are recommended, namely:

- Placing teachers at the centre of the quality debate
- Capacity building
- Community engagement
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Systemic approaches to teacher development
- Sustainability

While the recommendations are reported in themes, in practice "*it should be recognised that they are inter-related requiring a systems wide approach to reform*" (p. 115). Absolutely!

However, there is at least one major policy and practice field that is also crucial to bringing about the improvements the authors argue for in each of the countries and through the supporting chapters. Given how central teachers and educational leaders are to driving and sustaining the desired changes, attracting and then retaining the best educators to the most demanding and challenging locations must be a top priority The challenge continues to be pertinent for education in rural, regional and remote locations, not just in the nominated case studies, but universally.

References

Fontana, A. & Frey, J.H. (2005). The Interview: From Neutral Stance to Political Involvement. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Third edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.