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

Mary-anne Macdonald
Edith Cowan University
m.macdonald@ecu.edu.au

Christina Gray
Edith Cowan University
c.gray@ecu.edu.au

Sarah Booth
Victoria University
sarah.booth@vu.edu.au

Terry Ngarritjan Kessaris
Edith Cowan University
t.kessaris@ecu.edu.au

Kirsten Lambert
Murdoch University
Kirsten.lambert@murdoch.edu.au

Takeia Beard
Pilbara Universities Centre
takeia@puc.edu.au

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).

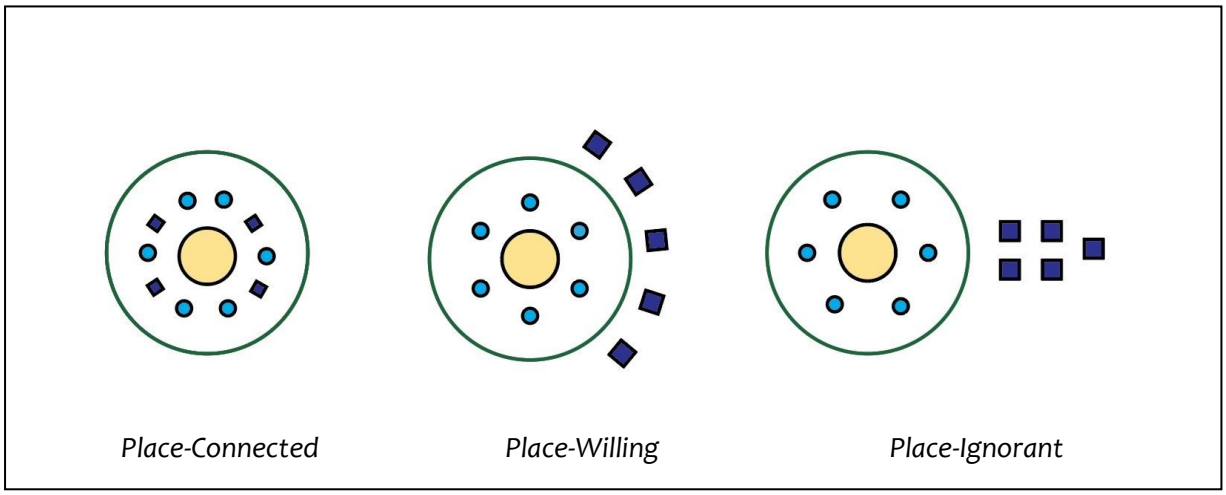
Consciousness is a continuum, rather than a single state. White and Reid (2008) explained:

> *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***



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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