



A Picture Paints a Thousand Words: The Lure of Regional, Rural and Remote Teaching

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Abstract

Globally education providers are struggling to employ teachers across all school sectors. This crisis is acute for rural, regional, and remote schools in Australia, where the isolation, limited services and impact on career pathways are major deterrents to attracting and retaining qualified teachers. These challenges often overshadow the personal and professional benefits associated with teaching within rural communities. This phenomenological research aims to explore teaching in regional, rural, and remote schools by describing and interpreting photographic artifacts supplied by university alumni teaching in these locations. Findings from thematic analysis of the photo stories reveal commonalities relating to the environment and the people who live in these locations. The environment theme related to natural beauty, serenity, and time to enjoy outdoor pursuits, where participants felt these helped them to cope with the pressures of teaching. The people theme revealed how the participants developed close connections to their colleagues and the wider community. They felt these connections helped to overcome both the social-emotional and professional challenges they faced in their teaching role. Findings demonstrate the importance of social, cultural, and professional immersion for teachers when working in rural, regional, and remote locations and highlights the benefits to their overall health and well-being as they face challenges of the job common to all teachers. This study serves to better inform graduating teachers about the benefits of teaching in rural, regional, and remote communities, by providing a balanced, strength-based view of teaching in these locations and redress the staffing crisis these areas consistently face.

Keywords: *Rural regional and remote teaching, early career teachers, teacher education, phenomenological research, photo analysis, deficit discourses*

Introduction

Addressing the international challenges of securing a quality teacher workforce is heightened in nations where sparse populations are spread over considerable distances. However, O'Doherty and Harford (2018) raised the impact of geographic isolation on not only Initial Teacher Education providers in Scotland but on half the European education systems surveyed in the 2018 Eurydice report (p. 655). How remoteness is appreciated impacts teacher attraction and retention regardless of whether it is experienced in Greece or Canada (O'Doherty & Harford, 2018). In a vast country like the United States the challenges are equally diverse. Lee and Yang's (2025) investigation of teacher employment trends in Wisconsin reveals rural schools are rarely the first choice of applicants; an experience shared internationally. For Williams et al. (2022) the impact of

teacher perceptions and school culture were stories that needed to be told in rural Idaho. The move beyond incentives was raised by Williams et al. (2022) and the importance of mentoring and induction into rural schools and communities foregrounded as an opportunity to encourage teachers to be conscious of their rural fit, whilst community acknowledge teacher agency in schools (p. 100). These themes illustrate the common ground shared by those seeking to arrest the teacher shortage in rural education.

The provision of education in regional, rural and remote communities in Australia has historically been an area challenged by the lack of a consistent and shared government policy (Roberts & Cuervo, 2015) at both state and federal levels. The 2000 Human Rights and Equal opportunities Commission and the 2017 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education by Halsey (2017) identified conditions of inequality in educational provision that persist today (Patfield et al., 2024). Meeting the disparate needs of regional, rural and remote communities by education departments at all levels continues to concern communities, teachers, and educational researchers (Roberts et al., 2024). Those with experience in the field of regional, rural and remote educational research note the focus, after 30 years, remains on a deficit discourse, continually revisiting the issues of funding, the cost of provision and binary views targeting rural disadvantage and the use of these barriers to engender a call for change (Guenther et al., 2023; Roberts & Guenther, 2021). Lack of reflexivity in policy making has also contributed to the current crisis in staffing schools regional, rural and remote schools, and as teacher agency is eroded, teachers become increasingly disheartened and choose to leave the profession (Cuervo & Vera-Toscano, 2025).

Educational disadvantage in these communities is deeply rooted in location, geography, logistics and tradition, where injustices are so commonplace they are accepted as par for the course. Observations by Patfield et al. (2024) referred to this phenomenon as cultural subordination which was closely linked to economic injustices regarding the application of government policy and the distribution of government funds. Patfield et al. (2024) refer to these practices as metrocentric in that regional, rural and remote locations are seen as lacking basic services and hence are positioned as problematic and viewed through a deficit lens. Solutions to staffing have focused on extra school funding and resourcing, transfer schemes and financial and material incentives for staff. Although these schemes partially address the social injustice experienced by regional, rural and remote schools, they still fail to realise the specific needs of each of these unique locations. Current research within rurality calls for a shift from this metrocentric view of education, to one which recognises the uniqueness of these schools (Guenther et al., 2023; Patfield et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2022). Stakeholders within this geographic space are eager to shift the existing deficit discourse to a strength-based focus to promote and support the uniqueness of communities. Teaching in a regional, rural or remote location, enables educators to embrace the unique ways of living and working in these communities (Patfield et al., 2024). Connecting to place and community can enrich the experiences of teachers and enhance their well-being (Louth, 2025). While regional, rural and remote communities continue to be seen by Government Education Departments as inherently similar in nature, policy makers continue to group these contexts together (Roberts et al., 2022). This blinkered view perpetuates the one size fits all approach stalling progress for regional, rural and remote schools, by failing to recognise the positive attributes unique to each location. This research is grounded in applying a strength-based approach to address the current regional, rural and remote teacher attraction and retention crisis.

Background

Attracting and Retaining Teachers to Rural Areas

The teacher shortage has reached critical levels across Australia, with the Australian Government predicting a shortfall of 4,100 teachers by 2025 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). The impact of this shortage is painfully evident in regional, rural and remote areas, as these locations battle against a deficit discourse and struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers. Historically, regional, rural and remote schools in Australia have been defined by both geographical location and population density through data obtained by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021). In Queensland alone, approximately 69% of schools are located outside of urban areas. Federal and State governments have offered monetary incentives as recompense for the economic realities of teaching in these locations. Although it helps to distribute funds to these communities, it still paints regional, rural and remote locations in a negative light.

Many proponents of regional, rural and remote education argue for a strength-based approach to teaching. Some Initial Teacher Education providers deliver specific courses that focus on rural teaching and combat the deficit notions of teaching in these locations held by pre-service teachers (Roberts et al., 2022). Whilst Initial Teacher Education programs provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to undertake supervised professional experience in regional, rural and remote locations these programs fall to largely metropolitan institutions, are optional and compete with urban placements and attractive international practicums (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Kline et al., 2013). The inclusion of contextually relevant content within Initial Teacher Education courses (Hudson et al., 2021) and immersion programs (Harris et al., 2025; Thiele et al., 2024) provide pre-service teachers with access to and experience in locations they may have never contemplated. In developing place consciousness (Kline et al., 2013) and rural knowledges (Adie & Barton, 2012) it is acknowledged that while participants on rural placements report positive impressions, it may not be enough to entice pre-service teachers to take a rural post (Adie & Barton, 2012; Downes & Roberts, 2018). The lack of rural placement opportunities and rural teaching content in teacher education programs contributes to the misrecognition of the cultural value of rural schooling.

Beyond a Deficit Discourse of Rurality

Promoting teaching in regional, rural and remote locations is challenged by the perceptions and values of the metropolitan majority. Lacking personal connection or appreciation, people revert to narratives of isolation, difficulty, and cultural disadvantage (Cuervo, 2020; Patfield et al., 2024). Misrecognition has focused successive governments on approaches that apply the interpretation of those who lack understanding of what it means to identify as rural into policy (Patfield et al., 2024). To value rurality requires innovation in policy that equally considers social, cultural, and economic layers. Cuervo (2020) drew attention to the value of place in the politics of recognition (p. 143) as an opportunity to reframe rurality through a positive lens, enabling teachers to see beyond perceived difficulties. In this way, negative perspectives are addressed by the provision of realistic, practical, and supportive information for pre-service teachers to contemplate a teaching career in regional, rural and remote locations (Guenther et al., 2023; Patfield et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2022).

Government or public schools make up over 80% of regional, rural and remote schools across Australia (Roberts et al., 2022) making a reassessment of the national deficit-focused relationship with these locations pressing (Cuervo, 2020; Guenther et al., 2023). Paterson et al. (2024) highlights the importance of “*telling positive stories about rural education*” (p. 106). In doing so these stories have the potential to challenge the negative connotations applied to teaching experiences and enable difference to be refined. This allows a shift towards acknowledging the

complexities of how “*context, geography, place and space are important*” (Paterson et al., 2024, p. 111).

Paterson et al. (2024) sought to explore rural contexts in Scotland, Indonesia, Chile, and Australia and “*promote rural contexts as diverse locations that cannot be stereotyped*” (p. 110). Although the research of Paterson et al. (2024) focused on small samples, the combined impact of telling stories with shared themes was evident. The connections to community, inclusivity and commitment to the profession were accompanied by recognition of the opportunities for personal and social development. One participant’s experience of returning to the city to find “*no one talks to you.*” (p.110) offers a misrecognition of isolation that positions city dwellers with the deficit experience. The use of positive stories is not designed to present the rural as ideal, but to illustrate that perhaps difference can be interpreted differently (Paterson et al., 2024). Willis and Louth (2024) in sharing the positive connection reported by alumni in regional, rural and remote locations, noted that ‘challenging’ and ‘rewarding’ are terms used in equal measure. Although these teachers acknowledged learning to live in a regional, rural or remote area raised considerations they had not previously experienced, there was a strong sense of worth and personal growth that saw the teachers not only surviving, but thriving (Willis & Louth, 2024).

Support for regional, rural and remote teachers to enable them to thrive should encompass social, geographical, emotional, personal, and cultural considerations relevant to their unique needs and locations (Louth, 2025). The opportunity to “*reclaim the rural as strength*” (Patfield et al., 2024) may begin with the stories that respect what rurality encompasses. In doing so the opportunity to broaden the focus on educational research to an approach that promotes regional, rural and remote locations, lifestyles and teaching may allow the narrative to be rewritten (Guenther & Cuervo, 2024). The call to reframe teaching away from deficit discourse and ideals (Cuervo, 2020; Patfield et al., 2024; Roberts & Guenther, 2021) by listening to those who value rural experiences may see a new generation eager to immerse themselves in teaching in these locations.

Rural Consciousness and Readiness

Research relating to encouraging pre-service teachers to consider teaching in a regional, rural or remote location has identified factors that contribute to positive experiences. Hudson et al. (2021) demonstrated the importance of preparing pre-service teachers for life in communities, so that they were physically, emotionally, socially, and mentally ready for teaching in such locations. Furthermore, their research highlighted the importance of mentoring and developing community connections and how positive experiences helped pre-service teachers to overcome initial feelings of isolation and loneliness. The establishment of connection to community and immersing themselves in the environment was found to be a key factor for graduate teachers in developing rural consciousness and creating a positive work-life balance (Louth, 2025; Willis & Louth, 2024). The importance of developing a rural consciousness (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Louth, 2025) is a key element to broadening teacher perceptions. Rural consciousness encompasses the potential for personal and professional growth, to be adaptable and capable of navigating new locations, communities, and workplaces. This approach seeks to address the culture shock some teachers experience engaging in communities and lifestyles foreign to their metropolitan lives (Brown & L’Estrange, 2023).

Teacher Wellbeing

From a strengths perspective Buchanan et al. (2013) identified categories influencing longevity in the teaching profession as being: collegiality and support, student engagement and behaviour management, working conditions and resources, professional learning, workload, and isolation. Several studies pertaining to teacher well-being have examined the impact of teacher stress and burnout on students’ well-being. Carroll et al. (2021) found teacher stress and burnout affected multiple facets of students’ well-being and the academic environment they were

attempting to function within. Earlier findings by Willis et al. (2019) found teachers were better able to support their students learning and development when their own emotional well-being was protected and supported.

Oberg et al. (2025) when investigating teacher well-being in Australia, found teachers with higher levels of well-being and perceived efficacy, were less prone to exhaustion and burnout. Several studies indicated that teacher stress and burnout negatively impacted student outcomes. Research has shown that negative behaviours and lower academic performances amongst students correlated with being taught by highly stressed teachers (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Madigan & Kim, 2021). Carroll et al. (2021) found conducting an intervention program for teachers based on mindfulness, led to significant reductions in teacher stress levels and improved teacher-student relationships within the classroom. Hwang et al. (2018) conducted a systematic literature review of mindfulness interventions on teachers and found interventions resulted in enhanced teacher well-being and teacher performance. Hwang et al. (2018) further examined the type of mindfulness intervention programs conducted, with the most success gained when teachers paid attention to themselves and lived in the present moment. When teachers focused on their physical responses (breath and movement), mental experiences (thoughts and feelings), and were emotionally nurtured (accepted and cared for), their reported levels of well-being increased dramatically as their psychosocial health was supported (Hwang et al., 2018; Spilt et al., 2011).

Educator well-being was a focus in research by Oberg et al., (2025) who found teachers with higher levels of well-being and perceived classroom efficacy were less prone to burnout and emotional exhaustion. Their findings reflected those of earlier studies (Arens & Morin, 2016; Beltman et al., 2011) who similarly found prioritising teacher well-being was essential for creating supportive and productive learning environments. When considering Early Career Teachers as they enter the high stress environment of the classroom, Kelchtermans (2019) research found it was critical to retain early career teachers to ensure schools remained innovative and responsive and maintained a pathway to nurture future school leaders.

Recent research into the experiences of Early Career Teachers has noted how positive many early career teachers were about teaching in regional, rural and remote settings (Louth, 2025). Many Early Career Teachers espoused the enriching and rewarding experiences of teaching in these settings and attributed these to immersing themselves in cultural, social, and environmental opportunities afforded to them in the setting, noting such experiences were not available to them in an urban teaching location. Unpacking the practices of early career teachers thriving might uncover mindfulness activities that may give further insight into how establishing a connection to place, might nurture well-being. Indeed, the opportunity afforded to educators in regional, rural and remote settings to value connecting to place and people through practicing deep listening (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2019) may be a contributing factor towards their ability to thrive in those settings. Valuing deep listening, people, and connections to place may foster a deeper understanding of how to embrace work and life in regional, rural or remote locations.

In summary, the research demonstrates teacher well-being is critical to successful learning outcomes for their students, hence it is important to consider ways to enhance teacher well-being, regardless of geographical location and career experience. When considering how the teaching profession might retain early career teachers, specific questions regarding how teachers can make positive, supportive connections within their schools and communities and establish a sense of place within their location, may enhance their longevity in the profession.

Researcher Positionality

Louth is an experienced educator who has taught in rural and regional schools in Queensland and the United Kingdom and currently teaches in Initial Teacher Education programs in a regional University. She is committed to changing the negative narrative surrounding teaching in these

locations and embeds opportunities for pre-service teachers to enhance their knowledge and understanding of teaching and living in a rural context. She regularly sees and experiences the challenges of living and working in non-urban locations and seeks to give a rounded view of the challenges and opportunities presented in communities to encourage and prepare pre-service teachers to explore non-metropolitan teaching pathways.

Having been raised and educated in regional, rural and remote locations, Sanderson applied her commitment to education for students to a teaching career spanning remote and rural contexts in northern Western Australia. Educating a diverse range of students in an equally diverse range of settings she lived the joys and challenges faced by children, families and communities. She became increasingly aware of the impact positive perspectives of rural and remote teaching and life had on the willingness of those new to the career to remain in non-metropolitan locations, while mentoring early career teachers. Currently teaching in Initial Teacher Education programs she brings this commitment, experience and value for rural and remote life to pre-service teachers through research, course work and a leadership role in promoting experiences for pre-service teachers in rural and remote Queensland.

Aims of Current Study

This phenomenological research aims to explore the lived experience of teaching in schools, through the eyes of early career teachers working in regional, rural and remote schools using photos to share experiences and make meaning of their time teaching in communities.

Method

Research Methodology

This phenomenological research explores the lived experiences of early career teachers in regional, rural and remote locations through images and narrative created by participants. The research methodology combines participant-generated imagery with interpretative phenomenological analysis to provide a unique insight into the lived experiences of research participants (Bartoli, 2020). The use of participant-generated visual imagery is a well-established research method in the social science field (Drew & Guillemin, 2014; Pauwels, 2010). This type of methodology is unique in that it is open to the interpretation of both the participants and the audience, and as such, can pose some challenges to the researchers when interpreting and analysing data. To overcome this limitation, participants were asked to write a narrative to explain and justify their choice of photo, so that the participant voice was seen and heard. Furthermore, the data collected is very subjective to the participants and open to how they are thinking and feeling about the subject matter in question at that moment in time. In this research, participants were invited to take photos of their lives and/or communities and write a narrative explaining their reasoning and interpretation of these images that were representative of their experiences teaching in regional, rural and remote locations (Plunkett et al., 2013; Tsang, 2020). The use of photos as a data source allowed participants the opportunity to decide what and how to reflect, interpret and represent their time teaching in communities (Asaba et al., 2014; Latz & Mulvihill, 2017). Participants elaborated on their experiences by providing a narrative to accompany their photos by way of reflection, interpretation, and representation of their experiences, as recommended by Tsang (2020). Including the use of narratives to accompany the photos ensure the limitations associated with the subjectivity of interpreting participants meaning, was overcome. Reflecting on these images offers researchers the opportunity to investigate the space between “*what is said... and what is seen*” (Day et al., 2024, p. 2); an important distinction between what the participants intended to communicate and how the image is interpreted by others. The impact of these interpretations on appreciating rural consciousness, enhancing teacher retention, and creating positive connections to regional, rural

or remote teaching and lifestyle, provide a deeper appreciation of what is valued by these teachers.

Participants

Invitations to participate in the research were sent to university alumni teaching in regional, rural and remote locations. Recruitment of participants occurred through the alumni governance process of the university. Following acceptance of ethics approval, the Alumni team emailed participant recruitment emails to alumni, including informed consent and contact details of research lead investigator. Alumni self-selected, indicating they met the criteria of being early career teachers within the first five years of teaching in a regional, rural, or remote location. Twenty-seven alumni responded to the invitation and provided photos with accompanying narratives. All 27 participants were within their first five years of teaching and based in regional, rural and remote locations across Queensland, Australia.

Data Collection

A total of 29 photographs were uploaded by 27 participants, where all 27 participants shared one photo, with two sharing an additional photo. Participants were asked to only share images that did not identify the school or any individual other than the participant who consented to participate in the study. Each photograph was accompanied by an open-ended short response narrative explaining the context of the photos provided by participants.

In terms of the geographical locations of the 27 participants, 13 reported they were teaching in a regional location, between one- and nine-hours' drive from Brisbane. The remaining 14 participants were teaching in remote locations, ten or more hours drive from the Queensland coast, between Brisbane and Cooktown, or one or more hours drive north or northwest of Cooktown (Table 1). These definitions of regional and remote were taken from the Queensland Department of Education's definitions relating to regional and remote schools (Education Queensland, 2025). Of the 27 participants, 14 were based in a rural location where agricultural, pastoral or mining sectors were the dominant industries in that location (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants' Geographical Regional, Rural and Remote Locations

Description of Geographical Location	n = 27	%
REGIONAL. Between one (1) and nine (9) hours' drive from Brisbane.	13	48.15%
REMOTE. Ten (10) or more hours' drive from the Qld coast between Brisbane and Cooktown, or one (1) or more hours' drive north or northwest of Cooktown.	14	51.85%
RURAL. A regional or remote area where agricultural, pastoral, or mining industries are dominant.	14	51.85%

The demographic profile of all 27 participants regarding their school context varied, with 17 participants located in a primary school, nine in a secondary school, and one as a specialist teacher (Table 2). One participant was teaching in a non-government school, whilst the remaining 26 were in government schools (Table 2). When considering participants experience and qualifications, all were early career teachers, with 22 having completed a bachelor's degree and five completing a Master of Teaching degree (Table 2). Of the 27 participants, five were in their first year of teaching, 11 in their second year and a further 11 in their third year of teaching (Table 2). When reflecting on the stage of life these early career teachers were as they began their teaching career, 11 were young professionals with this teaching position being their first job out of university. Similarly, there were 13 mature aged students who had taken on this teaching

position as their first professional career since graduating. Three of the participants were career changers who had worked in other professional careers that required university degrees prior to undertaking this teaching role (Table 2).

Table 2: A profile of participants' early teaching careers (n = 27)

	Percent	Number
Level of schooling		
Primary	62.96%	17
Secondary	33.33%	9
Both (e.g., specialist teachers)	3.70%	1
Total	100%	27
Government or non-government school		
Government	96.30%	26
Non-government	3.70%	1
Total	100%	27
Years of teaching experience		
First year	15.38%	5
Second year	42.31%	11
Third year	42.31%	11
Total	100%	27
Highest degree		
Bachelor	81.48%	22
Master of Teaching	18.52%	5
Total	100%	27
Teaching career life stage		
I'm a young professional and this is my first job out of university	40.74%	11
This is my first job out of university, and I was a mature aged student	48.15%	13
I'm a career changer, I've had other professional jobs (that required a university degree) before this role	11.11%	3
Total	100%	27

Data Analysis

This research follows the analytical framework of Interpretive Engagement proposed by Drew and Guillemin (2014). The framework acknowledges five specific factors influencing data analysis and interpretation: The researcher, the participant, the image, the context of its production, and the audience. Interpretive Engagement comprises three stages which were followed in this study:

Stage 1: Participant meaning making using photos and narrative

Stage 2: Researcher-driven meaning-making and,

Stage 3: Recontextualising to make further meaning through a cross comparison of Stage 1 and 2 to generate visual and narrative representations and explanations of the phenomenon of teaching in a regional, rural or remote location .

The data analysis process for each stage is outlined below:

Stage 1: Participant Meaning Making

This stage focused on each individual image and associated reflections and guidance provided by the participants about how the image might be interpreted. This provided an understanding of the participant's intentions and acted as a rich description of the data generated. A thematic analysis of emergent themes across participants was conducted.

Stage 2: Researcher-driven Meaning Making

This stage involved the compilation of additional data comprising the researcher's reflections on content, processes and context of the images and narratives. Interpretive questions proposed by Rose (2012) and Grbich (2012) were adapted and used by the researchers to aid the analysis of visual images and included the following:

- What is being shown?
- Where is the viewer's eye drawn to?
- What relationships are established between the components of the image visually?
- How does the image convey meaning?
- Is there more than one possible interpretation of the image?
- Is this a contradictory image?
- Does the narrative fit with the image?

A further thematic analysis of the Stage 2 results was conducted to note emergent themes within the researcher interpretation of the data.

Stage 3: Recontextualising

This stage involved two parts, firstly a cross-comparison of the participants' and the researchers' interpretations of the images and the associated thematic analysis of each group set. The second part to this process involved locating connections to the emergent themes and attending to convergence and divergence alongside these themes (Bartoli, 2020; Tsang, 2020). Additional analytical questions as posed by Rose (2012) and Grbich (2012) were employed to further decontextualise the representations and are as follows:

- What knowledges are being deployed from this analytical process?
- Whose knowledges are excluded from this representation?
- How might different audiences interpret these images?
- How does the image reflect or depart from dominant cultural values?

The overall data analysis of Interpretive Engagement enabled relationships between the themes arising from the data to generate visual and narrative representations and explanations of the lived experiences of Early Career Teachers working in regional, rural and remote locations.

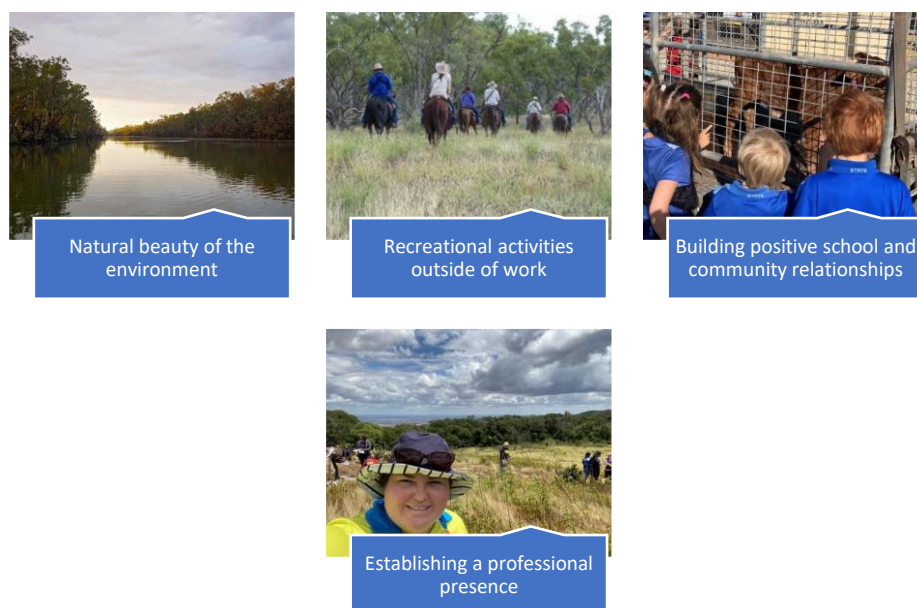
Results

The results of the photo analysis are presented in two stages, with both stages using an iterative thematic analysis, stage one from the perspective of the participants, and stage two from the perspective of the researchers.

Participant Meaning Making – Stage 1

Stage 1 focused on participants images and the narratives they attached to their images. These narratives involved their perceptions, interpretations, and reflections on their teaching experiences. Four common themes emerged from the analysis and are shown in Figure 1. The first centred on an appreciation of the natural beauty of the environment illustrated by Participant F’s appreciation of how their children were “*growing up in a unique setting*”. The second theme depicted taking part in recreational activities outside of the school environment highlighted by Participant H who relished the opportunity to explore “*amazing places... loaded with history*”. Conveying a sense of positive relationships within school and the community was central to the third theme, whilst the final theme involved strengthening connections between their professional practice and the school community.

Figure 1 Thematic Analysis of Participant Meaning Making

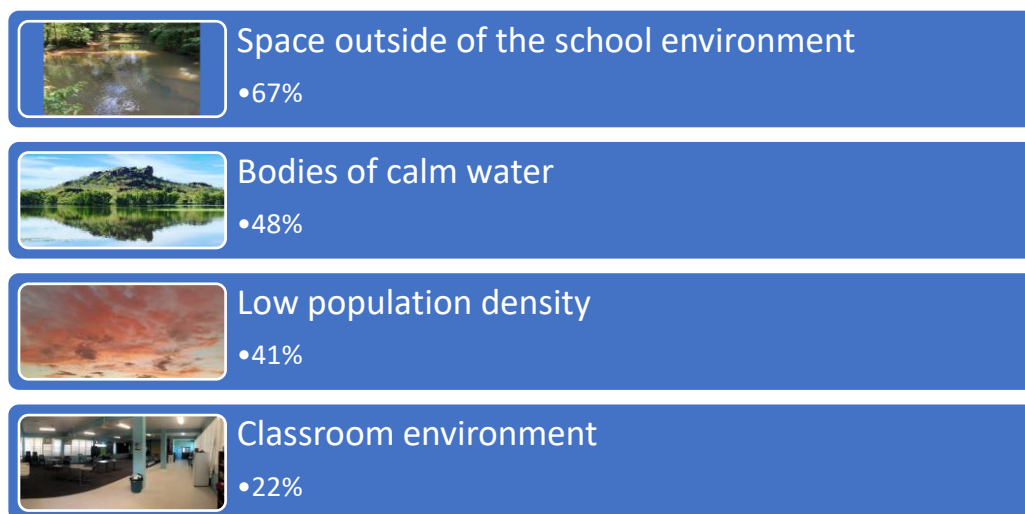


Researcher Meaning Making – Stage 2

Stage 2 required the researcher’s interpretation of the photo data in terms of what the image conveyed and how it represented the participants’ lived experiences teaching in a community. An iterative thematic analysis of the researcher interpretations of the data was conducted to examine further themes that emerged from the data.

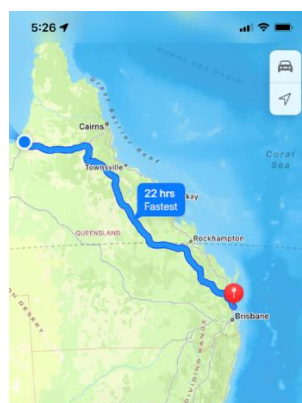
Four major themes emerged from the researchers’ interpretation of the photos and are evident in Figure 2. Ordered by number of responses, the largest theme focused on the spaces and environment the early career teachers enjoyed outside of the school/work setting. This was represented in 19 of the 29 photos. Another strong theme arising from 14 photos within the data depicted bodies of calm water that the participant was looking out over or displaying in their background shot. A third theme elicited a sense of low population density, with no other people or very few people depicted in 12 of the photos. The final theme involved photos relating to their classroom environment and how they were organising and managing their teaching load with only six of the photos being taken within the school/classroom environment.

Figure 2. Thematic Analysis of Researcher Meaning Making



Discussion

When considering the combination of images and narratives of the participants, a clear understanding of how they value their experiences teaching in a regional, rural or remote setting becomes apparent. Taking time out in the natural world was a prevailing narrative throughout the data, where many reflected on the valuable opportunities afforded to them to experience life outside the classroom. Participant O mentioned the “*beautiful sights and sunsets on a walk*”. Equally noting they found time for self-care and well-being in the tranquil or calming environments as illustrated by Participant R who combined this appreciation for the environment with their teaching role. Participant R recounted how whilst on a mountain hike with students, they marvelled at “*how green... how spacious and natural it is...*” and appreciated “*... the exploring you can do when you are not working*”. Some depicted their community resources or family as a place of importance and strength whilst living and working in such an isolated area, Participant P appreciated spending time with their family when not at work. The attraction of a boat and a “*freezer... stocked full of coral trout*” for Participant D and their partner illustrated how participants built strength in connection, community and food. There was a small minority of participants who viewed the isolation as a drawback, and this was present in the image they uploaded as it depicted some hardships they faced. For example, having to walk everywhere in the wet season while waiting for their car (Participant P), a challenge for sure with two children in tow. For others the tyranny of distance and being separated from family and friends was a reality of the role, but as Participant K explained with her image of a map demonstrating the journey that, “*... it’s the best experience I’ve ever had.*”



A cross comparison of participant and researcher meaning making was conducted to examine the nuances between the perspectives of the participants' and the researchers' interpretations of the images and the associated thematic analysis from each group set. Participants notions of the natural beauty of the environment coincided with the researcher's interpretation of the time spent in the environment outside of the confines of the school and work, the calmness and serenity of these environments and the absence of people, Participant W captured this sentiment with an image of a "beautiful sunset" and reflected that they "often spend my afternoons watching the beautiful glow and being grateful for where I live and what I have achieved". Similarly, when participants noted the recreational activities, they were participating in, these too were reflected in the researcher interpretation of the importance of enjoying the natural environment, particularly the water and the limited population enjoying these spaces. Early Career Teachers emphasised relationships between school and community with researchers drawing on this same point regarding community connections. Where participants drew meaning around establishing their professional presence, the researchers' noted this meaning as wanting to share the classroom environment they had established. The cross comparison of these themes identified connecting ideas and themes between both the participant and researcher groups (Table 3).

Table 3: Cross-comparison of Thematic Analysis From Participant and Researcher Meaning Making

Participant meaning making	Researcher meaning making
Natural beauty of the environment	Space outside of the school environment Bodies of calm water Low population density
Recreational activities outside of work	Space outside of the school environment Bodies of calm water Isolation and limited population
Building positive school and community relationships	Space outside of the school environment Classroom environment
Establishing a professional presence	Classroom environment

Meaning Making

When considering the common themes arising from the inductive analysis a further deductive thematic analysis was undertaken that aligned with the topics explored in the literature review. To further understand the regional, rural and remote experiences of early career teachers, findings are discussed in terms of the following five topics raised in the literature review, those being, teacher attraction and retention; teacher connection to place; teacher preparedness/readiness; teacher well-being; and teaching beyond a deficit discourse of rurality.

Teacher Attraction and Retention

The imagery shared by participants predominately reflects light, smiling faces, newly experienced landscapes, and positive connections to lifestyle. Participant J summed it up well, "the people, the places and the experiences will stay with you forever. The outback has so much beauty on offer". The experience of being a teacher in a regional, rural or remote location clearly resonated with this group of teachers and motivated the 27 participants in rural locations to add their voice to the rural narrative. In doing so, these early career teachers contribute to challenging the perceptions of a view of rurality informed by misrecognition (Patfield et al., 2024; Paterson et al., 2024; Roberts & Guenther, 2021). There was a clear connection to place, evidenced from the perspective of teachers enjoying and connecting to their rural environment and lifestyle. It may

also reflect Cuervo's (2020) notion that teachers would see the rural through an elevated status of place, belonging and connection.

Asking participants to 'capture' their rural perception through photographs enables the reader/viewer to also integrate their own rural bias and/or perceived deficit expectations. One photograph shows a teacher and family in front of a house with a lush garden and a high ring lock fence surrounding it. The explanation refers to family life outside of school and how the wet season has left the family without a car until the roads are passable. On initial analysis the focus on the fence and imagined addition of "barb wire" was perceived by one researcher; to be an indicator of the need for security amid a low socioeconomic location, a feature not referred to by the participant. Alternatively, it could also be considered this fencing is standard in remote locations where houses were vacant over holiday periods, and where local wildlife might take up competing occupancy. Ensuring teachers receive accurate and practical information about the places they will live and work as Roberts et al. (2022), Guenther et al. (2023) and Patfield et al. (2024) encouraged, will contribute to clear expectations and the ability to prepare for initial experiences in regional, rural and remote locations. These opportunities to share the realities of life ensure Early Career Teachers meet communities with a sound appreciation of place.

Teacher Connection to Place

Many photos submitted by the early career teachers (78%) were of locations away from the classroom environment. The accompanying narratives referred to spending time enjoying the area and connecting to the natural environment. Participant U regularly undertook the three hour drive to "*a constantly running river that is an exceptional place to get away... clear water and a river to float down*" indicating the distance was worth the effort. Taking time out of the business of teaching and capturing these moments on camera, demonstrates the value Early Career Teachers place on connecting with the local area and centring themselves with the environment. This clearly aligns with the deep listening Ungunmerr-Baumann et al. (2022) calls for and may indeed be a contributing factor to the early career teachers' ability to thrive in regional, rural and remote settings. Spending time connecting to the environment and developing an understanding of place would also contribute to the emergence of a rural consciousness (Louth, 2025) in early career teachers. Connecting to the environment and community would further go some way to mitigating culture shock, noted by Brown and L'Estrange (2023) and support teacher retention in communities.

The remaining 22% of photos submitted by the early career teachers were of the school environment and centred on showing how the participants had connected with the school community in a positive way and helped to establish their professional persona within the school. This positive connection reflects the findings of Willis and Louth (2024), which may enhance the longevity and retention of Early Career Teachers in regional, rural and remote locations. Furthermore, connecting with community aligns with the work of Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) regarding opportunities to establish co-designed curriculum that was meaningful to students and the community. Connecting with both community and the environment provides the opportunity for early career teachers to establish authentic relationships with communities and build a pathway to co-designed curricula in regional, rural and remote locations.

Teacher Preparedness/Readiness

The value of regional, rural or remote content or immersion experiences in Initial Teacher Education programs to ensure graduates are afforded as much exposure to teaching and living in these areas should not be underestimated (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Harris et al., 2025; Hudson et al., 2021; Kline et al., 2013; Thiele et al., 2024;), but is understood to need change (Murphy et al., 2025). These experiences must also be viewed as the efforts of an imperfect system preparing for rurality from a metrocentric perspective, echoing the explanations of Roberts and Guenther (2021). For these participants immersion in these locations has enabled them to see difference

differently (Paterson et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2024). Sharing these stories enables others contemplating regional, rural or remote teaching positions the opportunity of reflection guided by those likely to be colleagues. For example, recognising there will be tough days but knowing that ‘place’ plays a key role in wellbeing by affording opportunities for mindfulness and stress relief in the natural environment.

In addition, understanding how isolated locations and those impacted by weather events that might influence access to regular services may provide a more balanced understanding of life in a regional, rural or remote location, Participant G acknowledged how although it was a pristine environment it “... can be very remote and at times cut off by rising rivers...”. Whether experiencing cyclones for the first time or being prepared for wet seasons or appreciating how to stock a pantry when the nearest supermarket is 250km away or accepting that learning to change a flat tyre is a useful skill, these are all experiences that may be new to early career teachers. For Participant V it was the “... eye-opening experience...” of living on a working farm and appreciating the life skills and connections it provided to their students and community. Providing such practical scenarios and strategies ensures graduates are better prepared for teaching and less likely to experience culture shock. It is imperative to ensure graduates also know that for some, the notion of a nice place to visit, but “not to live if you are a young single” [Participant S] must also be communicated. In doing so, Roberts et al. (2022), Guenther et al. (2023) and Patfield et al. (2024) all call for the need for robust and comprehensive information sharing.

Teacher Wellbeing

Teacher readiness is a term recently used to determine if early career teachers have been adequately prepared to enter the teaching workforce and cope with the excessive demands of the profession. Establishing a positive work-life balance by paying attention to their own needs and taking part in activities that enable them to live in the moment (Hwang et al., 2018; Willis & Louth, 2024), can enable teachers to improve their health and well-being (Spilt et al., 2001). The results of this study indicated these early career teachers were taking more time outside of school to do non-work-related activities, like walking, hiking, fishing, swimming, horse-riding, and camping, that were connected to the environment or community within which they were living and working. Participant I reflected the connections between these elements in explaining her beach picture:

This photo is taken in the community where I was working and living. I took this photo after I had a few tough and big days of the realities of working and living in a remote community. This photo is significant to me as I was able to reflect on how I was feeling, and to take in where I was which helped me to feel better. It is also significant as I look back on it even now and know that I got through it and it helps me to remind myself that I can do it, and that I am capable. The beach is also a place where I feel [content], so having this right at my doorstep helped a lot.

The practice of deeply listening to one’s environment and one’s body has been encouraged by Ungunmerr-Baumann (2019) and documented through mindfulness intervention studies by Hwang et al. (2018). Both espouse the positive effects of these practices on psychosocial health, through physical, mental, and emotional domains of wellness. Earlier studies found when teachers’ emotional, social, and cognitive domains of development are protected and supported, then this enables them to better support the learning outcomes of their students (Carroll et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2019). Indeed, many of the photos were interpreted by researchers as demonstrating natural beauty and calmness of the locations, which may contrast with the hectic demands of teaching and provide further support for adopting strategies which support teachers across all domains of wellness.

These findings allude to further areas for reflection specifically relating to whether regional, rural and remote locations provide greater opportunities to establish a positive work-life balance. It further begs the question as to whether the isolation of the regional, rural and remote locations enable early career teachers to immerse themselves in the community and environment (Louth, 2025) and thereby enrich their experiences? Further, does the uniqueness of their experience offer Early Career Teachers opportunities without prejudice from outside urban environments or value systems (Patfield, 2024), and allow them to revel and thrive in these locations?

Findings from this study might suggest early career teachers are taking more time to connect with their environment which may have a positive impact on their health and well-being and their ability to thrive in regional, rural and remote locations. Furthermore, do the demands of teaching in a regional, rural or remote location make Early Career Teachers more aware of the need to take care of their well-being, given their previous support structures are not as accessible to them in regional, rural and remote locations? Further, is this a conscious act by early career teachers, where they take time out to seek a calm environment, still the mind, reflect, and recharge both mind and body?

Readiness and preparedness relate to retention and longevity in the profession and is an area that warrants further investigation. It has been established that high workloads are significant stressors to teachers and are a major contributor to teacher burnout. Further exploration of teacher health and well-being in regional, rural and remote locations might focus on being in touch with the natural world and how appreciating the beauty, serenity and uniqueness of one's surroundings might enable early career teachers to cope with the demands of teaching. Furthermore, might early career teachers be more adaptable because of their experiences compared to early career teachers in urban areas?

Beyond a Deficit Discourse of Rurality

This study supported Drew and Guillemain (2014) by reflecting and departing from dominant cultural values and signalling that teachers in regional, rural and remote locations are rebalancing the deficit discourse. Guenther et al. (2023) noted in the historical review of rural education publications that these contexts were pejoratively viewed, and, in most cases, this deficit appeared to have been "...normative..." (p. 4) and was applied across all levels of educational research and policy. After 30 years of focusing on the challenges Guenther et al. (2023) is not alone in wondering why we are not telling the stories of "...strength and diversity and the economic benefit that comes from rural and remote communities?" (p. 15).

The images in this study enabled both participants and researcher alike to look deeper into rurality and begin to consider the impact on rural education (Roberts & Guenther, 2021). Seeing what teachers in these locations see, offers the opportunity to consider how perspectives are challenged and changed. For instance, when a teacher reflects on their classes show and tell where calves children have raised were featured and usurped Lego as a favoured 'show and tell' [Participant T] topic. Acknowledging the commitment required by families in the process of delivering a calf to a school sharing event and flexibility on the part of the schools, recognises the lived experiences of these children. Another instance of a teacher whose image of cows in a paddock shared the value of living on a farm and how this experience enabled them to connect with their school and community [Participant V]. Each story adds diversity to the appreciation and understanding of what rurality may look like and mean in diverse locations. Another participant expanded on the depth of connection to place the image portrayed in their narrative to demonstrate how their picture painted a thousand words: "When I reflect on my time here, the people, the places and the experiences will stay with me forever. The outback has so much beauty to offer." [Participant J].

This research provides a platform for Early Career Teachers to share their experiences and the positive stories Paterson (2024), Patfield (2024) and Guenther et al. (2023) hope would move

beyond a deficit discourse. Initial Teacher Education providers, policy makers, schools and communities need to be willing to engage teachers with an honest and individualised approach to regional, rural and remote teaching and be cognisant that “*one size does not fit all*” (Guenther et al., 2023; Patfield et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2022).

Limitations of the Research

In undertaking a qualitative methodology that relies on participant generated imagery, the researchers acknowledge the subjective nature of the data. The prior experiences of the early career teachers comes into play, including, but not limited to, previous experiences visiting, living, and/or working in regional, rural and remote communities. Participants may have had personal life experiences in communities, and/or conducted their professional experience placements in a regional, rural and remote location, which may bias their views on these contexts and may have led to their willingness to teach in a regional, rural or remote contexts, and of course, agree to participate in the research. In addition, asking participants for permission to share their photos with pre-service teachers, may have inadvertently influenced participants to photograph and share only their positive experiences. Furthermore, it can be stated that photographs provide a memorable record of one’s experience, hence if the experience were indeed negative, one would be less inclined to photograph this, since one would not want to be reminded of such challenging times. However, history reveals itself through imagery that spans the continuum of human experiences and emotions, not just positive events or outcomes. However, the noted limitations effecting the results of this study can be mitigated in future research of this nature, by asking Early Career Teachers to share two photos, one positive and one negative, so that by taking a “*warts and all*” approach, pre-service teachers are provided with a more balanced view of teaching in regional, rural and remote locations.

Researcher bias in meaning making was reduced through the provision of participant narratives which gave a rationale for the choice of image/photograph. To draw further conclusions about readiness and the practices Early Career Teachers used to overcome stressful situations, further narratives could be employed, particularly relating to the “*warts and all*” scenario for ongoing research in this space.

Early career teachers working in regional, rural and remote locations were the focus of this study, hence targeted in the recruitment and data collection strategy employed for this research. This may be a further limitation to the study, in that there were no comparisons made to the experiences of early career teachers in urban or semi-urban areas. Further studies could investigate this comparison, particularly in relation to the opportunities for connecting with the school environment and local community and in supporting the health and well-being of early career teachers.

Conclusion

Exploring the lived experiences of early career teachers through imagery which depicted their reflections of teaching in regional, rural, and remote locations has offered unique insights into life in these communities. These largely positive reflections go some way to challenging the misconceptions and deficit discourse that has dominated perceptions of teaching in regional, rural and remote communities. Highlighting the positive attributes shared by early career teachers teaching in these places and spaces, affords all teachers the opportunity to glean a better understanding of the beauty and uniqueness that encompasses regional, rural and remote locations. By considering the notion of difference differently, urban perceptions of regional, rural and remote can be examined and redefined through a strength-based narrative.

Findings from exploring these stories enable positive stories about teaching in regional, rural and remote locations to surface and provide a more balanced understanding of not just surviving, but thriving, in these contexts. The combination of images and narratives allow further elaboration

on the current binaries relating to challenging yet rewarding, often associated with the regional, rural or remote context. These binaries are tested as the images and narratives add depth to early career teachers experiences and provide a realistic continuum that blurs the boundaries inherent in traditional deficit conversations.

Providing realistic yet high expectations of teaching in regional, rural and remote locations demonstrates the importance of social, cultural, and professional immersion for teachers when working in rural, regional, and remote locations as it highlights the benefits to their overall health and well-being. If fostering rural consciousness in early career teachers can change the deficit narrative associated with these locations, then the adaptability and mindfulness of these teachers can result in deeper connection to community values. The need to revalue regional, rural and remote teaching and change the deficit narrative through the eyes of those living and teaching in these locations has never been more apparent and central to sustainable educational practices in regional, rural and remote locations and supports the work of Roberts et al. (2022) in this space. This research proposes an approach that may lead to better informed pre-service and practicing teachers contemplating employment in regional, rural and remote communities, and in doing so, may redress the staffing crisis these areas consistently face.

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