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## Teacher Wellbeing in Remote Australian Communities

Alison S. Willis

*University of the Sunshine Coast, [awillis@usc.edu.au](mailto:awillis@usc.edu.au)*

Peter R. Grainger

*University of the Sunshine Coast, [peter.grainger@usc.edu.au](mailto:peter.grainger@usc.edu.au)*

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## Teacher Wellbeing in Remote Australian Communities

Alison Willis

Peter Grainger

University of the Sunshine Coast

*Abstract: This paper reports on a project aimed at investigating teacher wellbeing in remote communities in Australia. It utilised a multiple case study methodology to investigate the lived experiences of remote Australian teachers, particularly how remote teachers simultaneously manage the wellbeing and academic needs of their students. Findings show how the challenges of working in remote places impact teacher wellbeing and provides six practical recommendations about how to better support remote teachers. There is a present need to develop a framework of remote teachers thriving, so systems and communities are not over-reliant upon teachers' individual resilience in hard-to-staff places.*

### Introduction

There is a teacher shortage across Australia, but particularly so in remote areas (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Attraction and retention in rural and remote Australian schools have been challenges for over 100 years (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Consequently, the phenomenon has been widely researched and theorised (Downes & Roberts, 2018). Evidently, living in remote<sup>1</sup> places can be hard – physically, socially, economically, culturally – and research has problematised the complex and interrelated forces that contribute to teachers leaving remote communities (c.f. Downes & Roberts, 2018; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Kline, White & Lock, 2013; Schulz, 2017; White & Reid, 2008).

Difficulties are both personal and professional. Personal issues include insufficient health services, fitting in, lack of privacy and high visibility within the community, close living arrangements with colleagues, conflict, lack of support, expenses of remote living and relocating, family issues (Downes & Roberts, 2018). Professional issues include role dissatisfaction, understanding rurality and how to make the curriculum relevant for remote students, first language issues, cultural and racial differences (Schulz, 2017), lack of access to professional development, and lack of professional development for remote teachers (Downes & Roberts, 2018).

What is not widely researched is how teachers' working conditions in remote places impacts their wellbeing. Although wellbeing is an umbrella term and somewhat difficult to define (Graham, Powell, Thomas & Anderson, 2016) it is considered core to a strong civil society (Clarke & Denton, 2013). Further, wellbeing and mental health (a facet of wellbeing) have contagion effects (Gump & Kulik, 1997) and are therefore important to understand. Student wellbeing affects teacher wellbeing and vice versa (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'remote' is used to refer to remote and very remote geographical areas of Australia as defined by the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Map of 2016 Remoteness Areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Many of these communities include high populations of First Nations people. However, only three of the four cases in this study are situated in communities with high First Nations populations.

Therefore, understanding teacher wellbeing is not only important for teacher education and the stability of the remote workforce, but it is just as important for bolstering student wellbeing in remote places.

This research opportunity demands a deep inquiry of the lived experiences of remote Australian teachers so that we can find ways to best support teacher wellbeing in isolated places. Surveys (e.g. Kline, White & Lock, 2013), action research (e.g. White & Reid, 2008), and theoretical modelling (e.g. Kelly & Fogarty, 2015) have contributed to understanding this problem. However, the phenomenon (teacher wellbeing) is enmeshed with the context/s (remote places), therefore the agility of case study research (Yin, 2018) was used in this study as it accommodates the interrelation between participants and context.

Using a multiple case study methodology based on a phenomenological theoretical perspective our research investigated the wellbeing of four teachers working in remote Queensland and Western Australian communities. We sought to (i) investigate how teachers working in remote communities manage the competing imperatives of academic performance agendas and student wellbeing concerns, and (ii) identify ways remote teachers can be better supported in their work.

This paper presents background literature to establish the context of the multiple-case study, presents findings from the four cases, and draw conclusions about how teachers can be better supported in remote locations.

## **Background**

Education stakeholders recognise the significant wellbeing issues teachers face when working in both remote and Indigenous communities in Australia and are endeavouring to provide solutions to these problems through various structural wellbeing focussed initiatives (e.g. wellbeing support teams) and financial compensation (e.g. Remote Area Incentive Scheme<sup>2</sup> (Queensland Government, 2020)) designed to mitigate these problems. Nevertheless, preparedness for living in isolated communities and sustained wellbeing are significant issues for the profession, due to the necessity for education providers to provide quality educational opportunities for all students regardless of location. Indeed, the stability of teaching positions influences learner outcomes (Page, 2006). Hence, attracting and retaining teachers in remote Australian locations is a key focus for educational authorities and teacher educators, and requires research about teachers in those communities upon which evidence-based decisions for the future are made (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Schulz, 2017). This review investigates what is currently known regarding issues of isolation and working in remote communities.

## **Remoteness**

Attracting and retaining quality teachers to remote areas has long been a significant logistical, organisational and bureaucratic challenge for education providers in Australia (Buetel, Adie, & Hudson, 2011; Lake, 2007; McKenzie, Rowley, Weldon, & Murphy, 2011; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Young, Grainger & James, 2018). Similar issues are experienced in

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<sup>2</sup> The Remote Area Incentive Scheme in Queensland includes permanency, cash benefits, extended and additional leave entitlements, specialised induction programs, subsidised housing, flight allowances, generous transfer and relocation expense assistance.

other remote places like Alaska, USA (Munsch & Boylan, 2008) and rural South Africa (Masinire, 2015); however, this article takes an interest in the Australian context.

According to 2018 government statistical data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019) over 74,000 Australian school students attend schools in remote or very remote geographies (Table 1). The top three northern states/territory accommodate nearly 80% of all remote or very remote students: Western Australia (n = 24, 048), Queensland (n = 18,047) and the Northern Territory (n = 16,912). Altogether, students schooling in remote or very remote locations make up 1.9% of the Australian school student population (n = 3,893,834). These descriptive statistics provide insights into the marginalisation of remote students and support the findings of the federal Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey, 2018). The Australian government allocates more funds per student for remote students than to their metropolitan counterparts to cover the higher costs of schooling in remote areas (Australian Government Department of Education, 2019). Nevertheless, amassed funding in metropolitan centres far outweighs funding in remote areas.

State or Territory	Affiliation	ASGS Remoteness Area	Number of students	Total numbers of students
New South Wales	Government	Remote	2953	5,048
		Very Remote	1,167	
	Non-government	Remote	755	
		Very Remote	173	
Victoria	Government	Remote	535	568
		Very Remote	0	
	Non-government	Remote	33	
		Very Remote	0	
Queensland	Government	Remote	7,558	18,047
		Very Remote	7,414	
	Non-government	Remote	2,195	
		Very Remote	880	
South Australia	Government	Remote	5,362	8,804
		Very Remote	1,896	
	Non-government	Remote	1,405	
		Very Remote	141	
Western Australia	Government	Remote	12,649	24,048
		Very Remote	7,768	
	Non-government	Remote	2,460	
		Very Remote	1,171	
Tasmania	Government	Remote	565	989
		Very Remote	283	
	Non-government	Remote	141	
		Very Remote	0	
Northern Territory	Government	Remote	4,842	16,912
		Very Remote	7,700	
	Non-government	Remote	3,176	
		Very Remote	1,194	
ACT			0	0
<b>TOTALS</b>				<b>74,416</b>

**Table 1: Students (FTE) by ASGS Remoteness Area and Affiliation, States and Territories, 2018, adapted from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) Table 46a**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics does not report teacher data by ASGS (Australian Statistical Geography Standard) Remoteness Area. However, the student to teaching staff ratio for all schools and affiliations was 13.5 in 2018. Based on this, it could be estimated there are approximately 5,500 teachers working in remote schools across Australia, with the

majority of these in Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory. The city-country divide (Halsey, 2018) is exacerbated by the geographical locations of the major educational bureaucracies in Australia: The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is in Sydney, and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is in Melbourne. It's a long way from Melbourne to Broome or Bamaga.

### **The Effects of Isolation on Teachers**

According to Lake (2007) remoteness in Australia refers to isolation from social ties, administration, or remoteness from technical (e.g. lack of internet connectivity) or discipline-relevant expertise and resources. Many of these issues faced by teachers in isolated communities are connected to readiness, or more specifically, lack of readiness or lack of preparedness to teach in communities characterised by racial and cultural complexities, lack of resourcing in comparison to urban schools, the demands of 'living in a goldfish bowl' and expectations of complex classroom management challenges (McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004). Many of these teachers have never experienced life in remote or isolated communities where access to family and friend social support networks can be non-existent, social norms like drinking alcohol are banned, access to their preferred sport and cultural activities and hobbies and medical, dental and allied health services is unavailable, and inadequate housing and extreme weather conditions exist (Buetel, Adie & Hudson, 2011).

The difficulty is a result of personal, social, technological and professional isolation (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Hudson and Hudson, 2008) and more specifically, related to issues of transition and teacher wellbeing. It is important to note that wellbeing is not only reliant on the provision of resources, but on socio-ecological connectedness, a sense of belonging and connection to place (Clarke & Denton, 2013; Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011). Sullivan and Johnson (2012) question whether systems are over-reliant on early career teachers' personal resilience instead of providing adequate and suitable support for transitioning to remote locations. This paper proposes that isolation has the potential to impact teacher wellbeing.

### **Cultural Differences**

Commitment to people and place is a teacher quality that the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey, 2018) showed to be important for Australian student outcomes. However, a rural consciousness, or appreciation of people and place (and people in place), does not come automatically to every teacher or pre-service teacher posted to remote locations (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Kline, White & Lock, 2013; White & Reid, 2008). A "rural teaching consciousness" (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015, p. 5) is developed over time through experiences and relationships. Developing relationships can be difficult in remote Australian communities where teacher housing is segregated from community housing, and new teachers are frequent and therefore watched rather than welcomed (Kline, White & Lock, 2013). Further, some teachers are more motivated than others to develop place-based consciousness (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). In a post-structuralist study of teachers' desires for working in remote places in Australia, Schulz (2017) identified four stereotypes that describe outsiders moving to remote places – missionaries, misfits, tourists and mercenaries. Some teachers and school leaders are "cashing in" on the extrinsic incentives for taking up a remote position (financial and career progression) while others have desires to serve, pursue social

justice ideals of education for all, experience a different culture, or are looking for a place where they can escape (Schulz, 2017).

Place consciousness flows into place-based pedagogies. White and Reid (2008) explained that as teachers comes to know place, and the reciprocity between people and place, they develop “sensitivities, awareness, skills, attitudes, and abilities that will allow them to feel more at home and more powerful in a rural setting” (p. 6). This connectedness has positive effects upon the learning of rural and remote children (Page, 2006; White & Reid, 2008). This socio-ecological relationship between teachers and the wider community is reciprocal – some communities are more welcoming, some teachers more willing. Nevertheless, it takes time for trust to build (Halsey, 2018).

### **The Inter-Relation between Health and Education in Remote Locations**

Child development and education in remote parts of Australia is indelibly linked to health (Clarke & Denton, 2013). Delivering specialists services (medical, para-medical, special education) has long been a challenge for remote Australia, with many families not having access to services like speech pathology, psychology, or occupational therapy that are available in metropolitan areas (Bourke, Humphreys, Wakerman & Taylor, 2012). Children living in remote locations are more likely to have “poorer childhood development progression” (Clarke & Denton, 2013, p. 137).

Attracting health professionals to remote places is similarly problematic as attracting education professionals. Like remote education, remote health is impacted by a myriad of interrelated factors. Bourke et al. (2012) proposed a conceptual framework for understanding rural and remote health, which comprised geographical isolation, the rural locale, health responses in rural locales, broader health systems, broader social structures, and power relations. It accommodates the connectedness of physical, mental and social health with the organisational, social and cultural arrangements of a community (ibid). As discussed in the cross-case findings below, an absence of health services in remote areas significantly impacts the provision of education.

### **Research Design**

The nature of this research required a theoretical perspective of phenomenology, because we needed to understand *lived experiences* of teachers in remote communities (Friesen, Henriksson & Saevi, 2012). Further, it required case study methodology, because we need an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within its context (Yin, 2018). Case study accommodates investigations of a phenomenon (teachers’ lived experiences) that is indelibly linked to its context (remote locations) (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2020; Yin, 2018). Case study research typically asks *how* or *why* questions about a contemporary phenomenon over which the researcher has little or no control, with the intent of retaining holistic and real-world perspectives (Yin, 2018).

The research questions were:

1. How do teachers working in remote communities manage the competing imperatives of academic performance agendas and student wellbeing concerns?
2. How do remote teachers describe their experiences and tell their stories of working with young people?
3. How can remote teachers be better supported in their work?

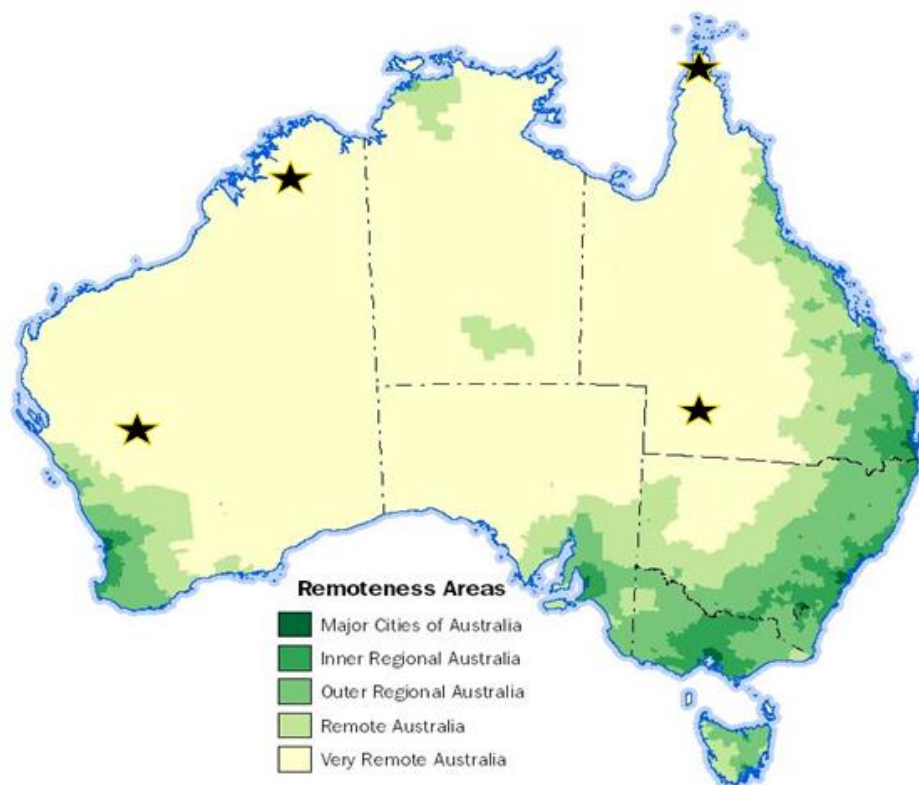
The following case study propositions were developed from the literature (reviewed above) to guide the inquiry process:

- The experiences of teachers in remote and/or Indigenous communities are unique (issues related to isolation).
- There is a disconnect between centralised (urban) bureaucracies and the real lived experiences of remote teachers (system issues).
- National academic agendas, including curriculum demands and performativity measures, are incongruent with the realities of living in remote communities (curriculum issues).
- Remote students have unique needs (student issues), but remote teachers know what they and their students need.

The four cases in this study have important illustrative qualities due to teachers' geographical locations and experiences. The cases were drawn from a larger phenomenological study that investigated how teachers managed the competing imperatives of academic performativity agendas and student wellbeing concerns. During this wider study we identified a need for a closer study of remote teachers' experiences, therefore a data set of four cases was created. Accordingly, the case studies are based on phenomenological interview data. This reliance upon interview data may be considered a limitation of this study; however, as it is a study of lived experience (phenomenology) a focus on participants' descriptions of their experiences meets the aims of the research. Further, the findings are replicated across the cases and therefore validated, as explained below. Table 2 presents a description of the cases and the map in Figure 1 shows case study locations according to ASGS remoteness areas.

Teacher	Level of Schooling	Remote Context	ASGS Remoteness Area	Indigenous Students	Internet connectivity issues?	Early career? (first five years)
Alex	Secondary	Far North Queensland	Very remote	>95%	Yes	Yes
Olivia	Primary	Central Western Australia	Very remote	>80%	Yes	No
Grace	Primary	Far West Queensland	Very remote	25%	Yes	Yes
Kate	Secondary	North Western Australia	Very remote	>90%	Yes	Yes

**Table 2. Description of the cases.**



**Figure 1. Map of ASGS 2016 Remoteness Areas for Australia (ABS, 2018) with approximate locations (for research ethics compliance) of the case studies.**

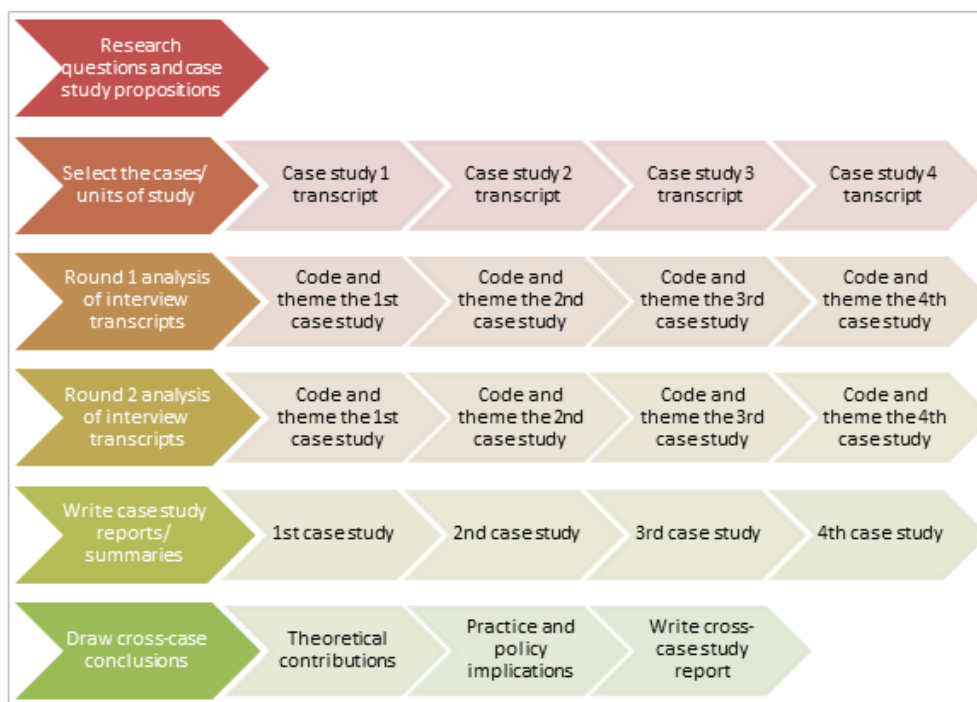
This multiple-case study allowed for a rich investigation of lived experiences. The research process is outlined in Figure 2. The four cases were separately coded and summarised. Codes, themes and case summaries were cross-checked between the authors (as illustrated in Figure 2).

The goal of case study logic is to replicate findings across the cases (similar to scientific experiment logic), for the purpose of making analytical generalisations. Where a survey uses sampling logic to create a representative pool of respondents to generate inferential results about a population, case study uses replication logic to generate analytic theory based on convergent evidence (Yin, 2018).

### **Data Collection**

To reach participants around Australia across various systems, recruitment was conducted through social media invitations using snowball sampling (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2020). We conducted phenomenological interviews with four teachers working in remote communities in Australia with the purpose of listening to their experiences and stories. The interviews were conducted by phone or video conference and lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. Interview transcripts were manually analysed independently by three different researchers to reveal and confirm consistent themes. The questions asked in the interviews related to teacher wellbeing (refer Appendix 1). Ethics approval was received from relevant bodies to conduct the research, and pseudonyms have been used in the presentation of findings below to protect participant identity.





**Figure 2. Multiple case study analysis process adapted from Yin (2018, p. 58).**

### Data Analysis

Case study interview transcripts were each manually coded twice. Individual case study reports were generated for each case, which included full interview transcripts along with researchers’ coding and interpretive notes. An outline of each case report is presented below. Data excerpts in the outlines were chosen to provide a comprehensive view of each case. Some teachers talked longer than others, and this is reflected in the lengths of the case study reports below. The researchers have made every effort to preserve the voice and views of the teachers in these reports.

Summaries of cross-case findings were generated and peer reviewed by the researchers. These summaries contributed to explanation building, and because there were multiple sources of evidence (four cases; construct validity), pattern matching (internal validity) and replication logic (external validity) were able to be applied and established (Yin, 2018). Addressing alternate explanations was also undertaken when analysing cross-case findings (external validity) particularly when clarifying how findings were specific to remote contexts as compared to metropolitan. Further, literature is included in the cross-case findings to deepen analysis.

### Findings

Outlines of the four case summaries are presented here to provide insights into teachers’ lived experiences in remote places.

### Alex's Case

Alex is a secondary teacher in Far North Queensland. She teaches multiple year levels. In her Year 7 class 40% of the students are at a reading level six years below their age (approximately Year 1). However, she must press ahead with the national curriculum as none of the students have individual learning plans.

From her experience, student learning is impacted by a mix of cultural, social, medical and academic difficulties. Particularly, family in/stability impacts student learning, including fractured family compositions and students moving between homes. One of her students had lived in 37 foster homes. School is often not a priority at home because of the hijacking nature of family issues:

*"Generally, it's really hard to tell often with their wellbeing whether they're still with their original family or not. There's a massive cultural aspect which prevents you being able to see a lot of the wellbeing stuff, until your relationships with the individual families improve to a stage where you're let in on that. You don't have access to knowing. I spent an hour calling home to parents the other evening and didn't reach a single parent. The numbers weren't right, or there was no reception."*

From Alex's experiences, she felt a lot of imposed "solutions" were textbook solutions that had been imported from other cultural contexts. Although everyone is doing their best and trying their hardest in challenging situations, school administration teams are not adequately supported by external systems, teaching staff are not adequately supported by administration, and consequently students are not always adequately supported by teachers. Finding real solutions and catalysing initiatives often comes back to the responsibility of the teacher. The teacher must take initiative to find assistance for his/her students; for example, contacting the Royal Flying Doctors Service about student medical needs.

*"You have to know about them (support services) and it's not particularly well advertised. You go and see them in your time and when they're up here; they're not posted up here."*

Alex found the Australian Curriculum was not always a good cultural fit for all students. She explained there is a risk of students prematurely concluding they are stupid because they are studying a curriculum that is foreign to them. This in turn affects their academic wellbeing and self-efficacy.

*"For example, one of the girls in my class, she comes from a broken family, I just marked her test yesterday and she got a D, but about different topics in science she can verbally explain to me and use higher order thinking skills. She can't write it, and also the topic was culturally not appropriate, but following the Australian Curriculum you can't not go through it."*

### Olivia's Case

Olivia lives and works as a primary school teacher in remote Western Australia. She describes her town as a pastoral and mining town with Indigenous community throughout.

*"We have a lot of family groups. Big [Indigenous] family groups will often travel between the three towns up the highway depending what is happening at the time – according to family funerals, feuding, housing availability... We are not a community as such, we're town with pastoral and mining industries."*

For Olivia, student wellbeing comes before academics. She talked about how things can happen nightly, or over the weekend, that can significantly impact a student's capacity to learn, including:

- Family or inter-family feuding, or unexpected visitors that interrupt children's sleep
  - Interruptions to services – e.g. electricity, internet, grocery store runs out of food
  - Hunger
  - Vicarious trauma from historical and familial tensions, which can build up over time
  - Transience – movement between towns due to family business or housing availability.
- “... then you have non-indigenous kids who are from pastoral country and it's mustering time. So they're not at school because it's mustering. Or we have kids who have fly in fly out parents, or shift working parents, and dad's on break. Dad's on break for six days so we've gone to [capital city] because that's the only time they get to spend with dad, so they're gone. That's another impact I suppose.”*

Olivia is very active in her wider community, so often sees why students come to school tired and hungry. Although, there are still cultural and social differences that prevent her from fully seeing and/or understanding some situations.

Olivia talks of the need to localise the curriculum to make it relevant to her students. She often uses code switching strategies to interpret content for Indigenous students. She described the incongruence between the reality of teaching in a remote school and the national testing (NAPLAN) agenda. NAPLAN is culturally and social obtuse for many of her students. For Aboriginal students who have English as an additional/second language, Olivia has code switched for them during NAPLAN testing because the test was not available in their mother tongue, although it was available in Mandarin, Vietnamese, Korean or German for other ESL speakers.

*“I sat my little poppets down and I read it, and I code switched I guess, and I stuck by the rules and I didn't say the maths steps, but we kind of did it that way. They still bombed out massively, but at least someone asked the question why. If you're going to offer it in Mandarin or Vietnamese why are you not offering it in Gngangara, Koori, Badimaya?”*

Olivia provided an example of a young boy who was social and culturally “very much at the bottom of the food chain”, often sleep deprived and hungry. She used whole class questioning techniques and the Zones of Regulation framework to discreetly identify his needs:

*“I have a little poppet who doesn't know where he belongs in life. Socially, culturally, he's very much at the bottom of the food chain. The only way he can get acknowledged is through his behaviours and his behaviours are – he gets the negative response through the negative behaviours – so that's the way he approaches his life daily.*

*...shame is a massive influence in our cultural life here... But generally, that little one doesn't have a good night sleep. He might not have slept in his own house, he might have slept in someone else's house. All those morning check ins are important like that. The first 15 minutes are crucial in gauging how students are, because even our most capable and resilient can come to school and be like meh, not dealing with life.”*

Sorry business (funerals) can also have a significant bearing on students' focus and learning. It can be difficult for students to “manage those big emotions.”

Olivia has seven-year-old boys in her class that have “exceptional” motor skills – they can skin and knuckle a kangaroo tail “like no one's business”, but they cannot write a compound sentence. Olivia explained kids in these communities need survival skills, and

school doesn't always teach them these things. For example, how to: change a bike tyre, fill in a form, keep passwords safe, or log into a government website.

Olivia explained that remote schools need significant financial support. They need funding for travel so that remote kids have equitable access to excursions. Many of her students had never been to the movies, the theatre, a zoo or a theme park. They need funding for medical services, including hearing specialists, occupational therapists, and mental health services.

Moreover, remote schools need funding for relief teachers so that taking a sick day doesn't impact your colleagues:

*"We don't have relief teachers. We are struggling with the flu at the moment and if someone's away, you get combined classes, you miss out on contact time. I had two other classes combined with my English class earlier last week."*

Further, it would be helpful to be able to take a rest day if you're overwhelmed (needing a mental health day is not the same as needing a sick day). Olivia explained: "We have some really sad emotionally unwell educators who have mortgages." They need support and time to get well, but unless they are *sick* (diagnosed with an illness) they cannot take time off. Olivia acknowledged the need for accountability in education systems, but implored, "we're losing people."

*"I would love all the departments of education to acknowledge mental health, it not being a sick day. If I'm not dealing emotionally and I need to just take a day to reset, recharge, be the best I can be, when I go back into the HR section to click in my absence, and the only option I've got is "sick leave" when I'm not sick but I just can't emotionally and mentally handle today, that then puts another level on top of your wellbeing because it's not spoken about. Because I feel that if it was acceptable to say, "Hey I'm not feeling well, I need some support," but the support is not someone telling me here's a phone number to go and ring a psych. Then to be able to go back into my HR website and even if it wasn't under mental health, even if it was just authorised absence, done."*

Compared to their city counterparts, there is significantly reduced anonymity for teachers in remote places because everyone knows everyone's business. You can't drive to the other side of town where no one knows you. Being able to take a day where you can call your mum or your best friend or take a long bath (have some time and space) would be a big help.

*"I don't go to work, I don't go anywhere. Because if I go down the street people see me, "Why's she not at work? She doesn't look that sick." I can't take a mental health day. If I'm struggling emotionally and mentally, I need to stay in my house because we live in such a small community that people will be like, "Oh how come [name] was down at the post office? She doesn't look that sick to me."*

Olivia explained that at time she used social media to connect with teachers outside her context. She found this inspiring and encouraging.

### Grace's Case

Grace explained that in a two-teacher primary school in very remote Queensland there is not a lot of access to support, so "it's up to the teachers on the ground." This was true for Grace when it came to embedding local culture in the curriculum, responding to students' developmental medical needs, troubleshooting ICT problems, and informing parents of the value of education.

*“Our kids/teachers don’t have the latest – we take quite a bit of time to update our laptops and computers. But we’ve got enough for them to be able to access the curriculum with ICT and get what they can.”*

A Guidance Officer visits town once a term, but there are no support structures within the school apart from the teachers themselves. Grace uses social media to reach out to other teachers and as a platform to share her remote experiences.

Grace has taken the initiative to contact a regional hospital nearby (within flying distance) to get support for her students, including mental health services and occupational therapy. They won’t come out unless there is a severe case or a lot of children to see, so the teacher has to reach out and correspond with health professionals remotely. The community has a doctor visit once a week and a FIFO nurse who is two weeks on two weeks off.

*“No support structures within the school. It’s mainly outside the school, so I’ve linked in through [Regional] Hospital they’ve been really good in the early years space for that sort of thing – all round from mental health to OTs and that kind of thing. But you have to reach out to get that and it via correspondence. So unless it’s severe or you’ve got a lot of children they can see at once they won’t actually come out. And you’ve got to make that call because they don’t come out.”*

There is a drug problem in Grace’s remote community, which can impact students’ home lives. She often checks in to see if kids have had breakfast or enough sleep the night before and uses the Respectful Relationships program in her teaching. Many of her students’ families are affected by drought-related stresses: “...the drought affects the families and that affects stress. We’ve got a couple of station kids at the school and they have jobs at the properties.”

One of Grace’s greatest challenges was explaining to parents the value of schooling. She felt that parents didn’t view children holistically, that there was a lack of understanding about child development. For example, they didn’t always value singing songs, show and tell, or telling stories about weekends. She felt her role was to help parents understand why they did certain things at school and how these activities support child development.

*“I think the wellbeing of students is something that is more of a responsibility of teachers in today’s society, that wasn’t something I believe was something that was as prominent when I was at school. You’re having to make sure that you support the kids because they haven’t eaten that morning, or they haven’t had enough sleep, or a lot of the responsibility of the wellbeing of the child falls on the teacher nowadays.”*

### **Kate’s Case**

Kate prioritises wellbeing over academic performance. Relationships are vital: getting to know your kids helps you understand their triggers, and the signs of them not having a good day. Kate uses the Zones of Regulation framework to check in with her kids. Kate explained that before covering curriculum content, physical needs must be met first and she has practical solutions in her classroom and in her school help students, including breakfast programs and emergency lunches. Further, she allows her students to take a nap when they are sleep deprived. Kate found that meeting real physical needs builds trust and relationships with students.

*“I have blankets in my class. That’s really crazy because of where we are but the air conditioning can be very cold for a lot of these kids. I think relationship, and just making sure that their needs are met as best you can, you can’t fix every*

*need obviously. Having band aids in your class. These kids come to school with bare feet and hygiene isn't the best. We give out toothbrushes and lots of things."*

She described her students as trauma kids, bush kids, rough kids, from "low low low" socio-economic backgrounds. Kate believed consistency to be key in building relationships and used the following strategies as "pick me ups": take a break to listen to music, play games, go outside to play basketball or other sport, or going for a walk and talk. Kate gave an example of one student who was not himself one Monday morning, so she sent him for a walk and talk with the EA (Education Assistant) who found out the student hadn't eaten since Friday. He was also staying with a different family. Kate explained they don't tell you everything, because of cultural differences. Nevertheless, often the first priority is to keep the kid safe and show some care.

Identifying the causes of student troubles was easy for Kate:

*"You know the story, they were kicked off the land, and the workers would have to pay them. If your grandparents were raised in that then it's going to affect you... yeah, lots of poverty, lots of trauma. Alcohol can be a part of that.*

*Domestic violence can be a part of that. It's just a cycle really."*

She explained that to help these kids focus it was important to find something for them do with their hands every day, making allowances for fidgeting and allowing them to move around.

Support available to teachers included accessing to counselling services through her employer and the local GP. However, schools are very political places and admin are not always supportive. Particularly, if administration staff have their own personal agendas, you can get "squashed": "People leave up here quite often. They don't last or see their contract out because it can get too much, or systems aren't followed through."

Kate identified need for peer support, perhaps through online communities so collegiality could be wider than the small community to which she belonged. Kate used social media to raise awareness about the remote places in which she lived.

She explained that a teacher's mental health is important in these hard places:

*"That's probably what you do when living out in these places, like your mental health is so much more important than when you were in the city. It's not like it's not important in the city, but you have more things around you, more everything around you. What you do socially, or family or beach or friends. There's just not a whole lot of anything out at these places and when it's such a really hard place."*

There is not enough trauma training for teachers in hard places: "They do training, but the turn over is so high." Teachers need to be more educated and informed about trauma:

*"...there's not enough people who are trauma informed out here. They say on paper they've done a course, or they've sat in a meeting for two hours on a Wednesday afternoon and ticked a box, but it doesn't actually inform their practices."*

Kate also felt there was also a gap between the goals of bureaucracy and what research says. For example, pushing for academic outcomes in a traumatised community, when research shows that trauma trumps learning. It is important to have realistic goals to move forward.

## Cross-Case Replicable Findings

The cross-case conclusions synthesise the replicable findings of the four studies to present practical implications for informing practice and policy and theoretical contributions for better understanding the lived experience of teaching in remote locations. Common themes identified in the data were related to geographical isolation issues; student issues; curriculum issues; and system issues. Many of these were interrelated.

### The Need for Systems to Support Teacher Wellbeing

The four cases studies show that teachers working in remote schools suffer various, often interrelated wellbeing issues that are not experienced in other schools. The myriad of student wellbeing issues impact teacher wellbeing either directly or indirectly (Gump & Kulik, 1997; Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011). Teachers commented that large schools (in urban centres) can accommodate teacher wellbeing as a priority by allocating time and money due to their size and consequent availability of resources, but this was not possible in small schools. Notwithstanding, teaching is deeply personal everywhere:

*... we take home what our kids say and do. We take home what our colleagues say and do. Mother's Day – three of my kids don't have a mum. Two of my kids found their mum after suicide, and they are six years of age. (Olivia)*

*...our teachers take home so much. How many times do you talk to a teacher, and say, tell me about your class? [They use] all these possessive pronouns – my kids, my class, my students, my mob, my lot – everything is possessive because they are yours. We wouldn't be teachers if they weren't. (Olivia)*

It is difficult for teachers in remote schools to take a day off because of the small size of the town and the scrutiny faced by community members. This is already well established in literature (e.g. McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004), but what these findings show is that issues around anonymity are exacerbated by the fact that systems do not always provide relief teachers, making it even more difficult and subjecting to take a day off. That is, colleagues have to step up and take their classes, placing more pressure on peers, relationships and wellbeing.

One teacher noted the need for the official recognition of mental health rest days in annual leave calculations for teachers working in these communities. In connection with this is the inability of these teachers to participate in personal events such as birthdays due to excessive travelling time required to attend such events (e.g. family birthdays).

As result of the numerous issues remote schools face, many non-permanent teachers do not complete their contracts. This study revealed that a lack of trauma training could be a contributing factor to staff leaving, especially for first year or new-to-remote teachers. New teachers are less likely to cope because they have not been adequately trained to recognise wellbeing issues and they don't have the teaching experience to fall back on. One experienced teacher noted the importance of understanding complex family relationships, which can only come from experience over time.

Hence, teachers in these communities need more time and resources, both people specialists and programs and training to cope with the myriad of wellbeing issues. Although the wellbeing agenda is recognised as a high priority there are not enough professional development opportunities for teachers in remote locations, nor are there enough PD opportunities that are specific to remote contexts and issues, and it is difficult for teachers to take up professional development opportunities due to the significant pressure to provide relief for those teachers.

### Issues Related to Isolation

The four case studies remind us that remote communities are not demographically homogenous. They show remote communities can be a mix of rural, pastoral, mining industries, Indigenous Australians, and European Australians, and can also include transient populations. There is no singular profile of a “remote” person or community. Teachers need to take the time to get to know their communities and understand cultural differences and rurality (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Kline, White & Lock, 2013; White & Reid, 2008). Further, the four cases show that logistical interruptions impede education in remote communities, for example: unreliable internet and electricity, the local store running out of food, interruptions of mustering, missing school to spend time with a FIFO (fly in fly out) parent and travelling away for family funerals (sorry business). Natural disasters can affect all teachers in Australian schools, but the regularity and impact of these emergencies seems to be more severe in remote communities (e.g. the persistence of drought).

*Remoteness means teachers have to be more independent and resilient from the very commencement of their career: “...being so remote we don’t have a lot of access to any other support, so it’s up to the teachers on the ground.” (Grace)*

Teachers need to find the motivation/initiative/drive/resilience/persistence to take initiative and reach out for help in remote locations. Teachers work to actively build relationships with local Indigenous Education Officers, and they reach out to contact hospitals, the RFDS, universities and other support services of their own volition. If the services they need do not exist in their schools or wider communities (as they do in metropolitan areas), they must be the ones to make contact. Furthermore, they need to be observant and proactively act on their observations when concerns arise, as due to the size and isolation of their schools they are not buoyed up by the observations and proactivity of their colleagues as they would be in bigger schools.

Therefore, teacher reflexivity, proactivity and resilience are critical in remote communities (a) for their own wellbeing and (b) to meet the needs of their students. However, we cannot over-rely on teachers’ individual resilience without providing adequate support (Sullivan & Johnson, 2012).

### Meeting the Physical and Mental Health Needs of Remote Students

Teachers noted that students were coming to school not ready to learn due to being hungry and sleepless. All four case studies attributed this phenomenon to the interruptions of complex family dynamics and histories. These replicable findings highlight the pressing need to meet physical needs before learning could occur: “Your kids can’t do anything if they’re hungry, angry, lonely or tired. And if you can’t deal with all of that you can’t deal with academics.” (Olivia)

Teachers identified an inability of students to concentrate for extended periods of time, enforcing the implementation of check ins and pick-me-ups placing more pressure on teachers to balance academic needs with wellbeing needs. Teachers will often take time to feed students, let them sleep, or engage in diversional activities to help them settle. Teachers in remote places make it their business to have band aids, toothbrushes, emergency food, and blankets on hand.

Many metropolitan colleagues also face the same challenges with students coming to school dishevelled by family instability, violence, additions and hunger; indeed, many metropolitan schools offer breakfast services and the like. However, the compounding difference for remote teachers is that supplies (like food and first aid items) may not be



readily available or are very expensive (Downes & Roberts, 2018). There is less physical margin, and therefore emotional margin, in contexts where services are less reliable. Remote teachers load their cars with supplies when visiting larger towns and cities during their holidays, and these supplies, often self-funded, may run out before the next holidays.

Further, many remote students have medical needs that are unattended and undiagnosed (Clarke & Denton, 2013). It is difficult to get specialist medical attention in remote areas as a case needs to be very severe or there must be a high frequency of cases to warrant a visit from a medical specialist.

Teachers identified the causes of student wellbeing concerns to include trauma (including direct, vicarious and intergenerational trauma), poverty (including food and housing availability), family feuding, drug and alcohol issues, domestic/family violence, and drought-related stresses. As Kate described, “it’s Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.” However, teachers are not always privy to students’ domestic situations, especially if they are new to town/community and still building local relationships, which takes time and experience.

*“... you know they might have had so much built up trauma related to external things that have happened with them, and it’s just that one seemingly insignificant event that tips them over because of this built up vicarious trauma.” (Olivia)*

All these health issues and their causes also exist in metropolitan areas; however, in remote areas they do not exist alongside health services as they do in the cities. An absence of medical and para-medical professionals in a community means that social structures are not being influenced by their presence (social structures form part of Bouke et al.’s 2012 framework for understanding remote health in Australia). For example, local sporting matches are not informed or supported by physiotherapists, nor is there a doctor at the weekend BBQ to raise an eyebrow about food choices or drinking habits, nor is there a counsellor to debunk myths about post-traumatic-stress-disorder.

## Curriculum

All four case study teachers prioritised student needs before curriculum. They saw this as not-negotiable. If students were unsettled because they had not eaten for three days, not slept at home last night or hardly slept at all or were dealing with drought-related stresses affecting their families, they saw no point in pressing on with the curriculum until needs were met.

Teachers described efforts to adapt the national curriculum so that learning was place-based (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; White & Reid, 2008), relevant to Indigenous culture and/or rural/mining communities. Teachers in remote communities face specific challenges in addition to the more ‘common’ obstacles facing teachers in schools that are not remote, nor have significant Indigenous populations. The concept of ‘pressure’ was a common theme across the case studies, characterised by comments that identified the Australian Curriculum as not being always relevant for students in remote and/or Indigenous communities. Teachers noted that the Australian curriculum is often not culturally appropriate and hence, should be a different curriculum altogether, focussing more on local conditions (e.g. wet season). This might facilitate a student’s education as becoming a priority at home, which was a major challenge faced by teachers, as parents did not recognise their responsibility in this regard placing pressure on teachers to assume some parental responsibilities.

An increase in political pressure, often cited as the need to gather data or tick boxes, especially regarding NAPLAN testing was identified by every teacher. Although the curriculum can be differentiated, external testing (i.e. NAPLAN or prescribed assessment

tasks) are not differentiated. Olivia lamented: “We differentiate our learning, but we don’t differentiate our national testing”; and Alex worried receiving bad results adversely affected students’ academic esteem (a finding concurrent with Halsey, 2018). This is ironic, given many of these students have well developed strong survival skills, and could skin a kangaroo, change a bike tyre or go mustering better than their metropolitan counterparts. Learning must be relevant to the context.

Teachers viewed the focus on NAPLAN as a huge negative, as irrelevant, not differentiated and not useful for their students. Although the same sentiment is no doubt felt in non-Indigenous schools, the irrelevance of NAPLAN to the curriculum in remote Indigenous schools is particularly significant as first language issues were often identified as a major barrier and required students to code switch between their own first language (Indigenous), standard Australian English and Indigenous English.

In terms of curriculum delivery, access to IT infrastructure was cited as a major pressure for teachers and a learning constraint for students (and teachers) due to the remoteness of the location. Many of the students are considerably below their year levels, therefore teachers are having to adapt the content and level of the curriculum.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy: Solutions Identified by Teachers**

This multiple-case study makes seven practical recommendations for how remote teachers can be better supported in their work. These seven recommendations were generated from the cross-case replicable findings presented above (the need to support teacher wellbeing, issues related to isolation, challenges of meeting students’ health needs in remote areas, and a need for localised curriculum). These recommendations may be useful for policy makers, systems administrators and teacher education providers.

1. Provide reliable access to medical professionals – paediatricians, hearing specialists, OTs, mental health services.
2. Provide teachers and preservice teachers with comprehensive research-based trauma training for everyday practice.
3. Prepare teachers and preservice teachers for the challenges of working in isolated contexts and with First Nations communities.
4. Shift the focus to research-based strategies for curriculum development and student learning, rather than government performativity agendas or one-size fits all programs.
5. Provide teachers with wellbeing leave, so they can take time off when they need space without having to take sick leave. (It is difficult to get a medical certificate when there is no doctor in town.)
6. Ensure every remote school has a plan for relief staffing so that the burden of taking time off is not borne by the teacher who is sick or needs a mental break.
7. Generate a remote teacher online community, so that teachers can come together in a virtual staff room to share case studies and seek peer support from colleagues in similar contexts.

### **Theoretical Contributions: Understanding Teachers’ Lived Experiences**

Literature is awash with papers that identify the problems and challenges of teaching in remote locations (a sample presented above), but case study research provides insights into the perceptions and lived experiences of teachers who have survived and thrived in these places. Case study findings make salient the need to advocate teachers’ stories from remote

areas. Listening to the experiences of individuals aids in understanding the complexities of working in remote locations: culture, health, trauma, obtuse curriculum content, rurality, lack of resources. It also aids in understanding how teachers grow and develop personal and professional relationships with community and country.

This research highlights a need to develop a theoretical framework for understanding education in remote locations. Such a framework might be similar to Bourke et al.'s (2012) framework for understanding health in remote places. Rural and remote curriculum frameworks exist; however, a theoretical framework that considers the influences of community structures, power relations, and culture on education in remote places would be beneficial for policy makers, systems administrators, teachers, and preservice teachers. Such a framework would aid in understanding the uptake of and approaches to education in these places and the vital roles that teachers play in community.

This study further demonstrates the symbiosis between community health and education. Health and education have traditionally been investigated separately, but research participants from this study have clearly (and reliably) explained the impacts of health issues (both physical and mental) on children's learning. To this end, this paper contributes alongside other integrated studies (e.g. Clarke & Denton, 2013).

Finally, this multiple case study has shown that teachers in remote places need to be physically and mentally strong so they can respond to children's needs. Are we over reliant upon their personal resilience and neglecting the provision of adequate and suitable support (Sullivan & Johnson, 2012)? Remote teachers and preservice teachers need to be prepared – both with physical supplies, strategies for dealing with trauma, and emotional wherewithal. Life in remote places can be harsh, but also incredibly rewarding.

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## Appendix 1: Teacher Interview Questions

### Questions About How You Balance Student Wellbeing and Academic Performance

- How do you balance academic performance agendas and student wellbeing needs?
- Do you have examples you could share of when you've had to strike this balance?
- What support structures are in place for teachers in these scenarios?
- What do you do to support students?
- Where do these pressure stem from?
- How do you think students could be better supported?
- How do you think teachers could be better supported?

### Questions About How Teachers and Schools Use Social Media

- How does social media promote connectedness amongst the teaching profession?
  - Can you think of an example when this has happened?
  - To what extent does connectedness through social media affect wellbeing among teachers (positively or negatively)?
  - How can social media be used to enhance teacher wellbeing?