Surviving or Thriving: Early Career Teachers' Stories of Work and Life in Rural Australia

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ABSTRACT

The Australian teaching profession is currently facing a number of challenges. Heavy workloads, limited appreciation for teachers' work, low morale, stress, and burnout are impacting their wellbeing. In rural, regional, and remote Australia, issues centre around a shortage of qualified teachers in certain geographical regions and subject areas, access to quality professional development, as well as equitable funding and resources vary across schools and regions. Despite the government incentives and motivation to teach in rural, regional, and remote areas, attracting, recruiting, and retaining early career teachers, especially to these areas, remains a challenge for an already stretched teacher workforce.

Although Australian research has focused on early career teachers and rural, regional, and remote teaching, there is a need to update the longitudinal qualitative research in this area. Early career teachers' voices are integral in the broader conversation surrounding rural, regional, and remote education and in times of increasing demands on teachers. To address this gap, this research aimed to explore and understand the factors that influenced early career teachers as they reflected on their experiences of work and life during one school year in rural, regional, and remote Australia.

Framed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), this longitudinal qualitative research afforded the rich detailed exploration of six early career teachers' experiences and interactions in their context. From the semi-structured interviews gathered in Terms 1 and 4 of a school year, research portraits, shaped from the early career teachers' words, capture the compelling idiosyncratic stories of each early career teacher's rural, regional, and remote experiences. Themes generated from reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and analysed across the layers of the bioecological theoretical framework, were crafted into research poems, encompassing the holistic essence across all of the early career teachers' rich meaningful experiences.

Findings from this research revealed that early career teachers' personal characteristics (their unique resources and dispositions) and interactions with, and between, their contextual systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem) influenced their development and experiences in rural, regional, and remote Australia during one school year. The early career teachers' stories highlighted the many complex and interrelated factors that enabled some to thrive and flourish, while others experience challenges and survive. This research contributes resonant nuanced

insights and comprehensive understanding of early career teachers' experiences, development, and growth across four states in rural, regional, and remote Australia during one school year, the holistic support they needed to survive and thrive in their work and life in these areas, as well as communicating their voice through portraits and poems for audiences to access, understand, and connect with their experiences.

As the teaching profession is complex and challenging, there isn't any quick fix regarding attraction, recruitment, and retention of early career teachers to rural, regional, and remote areas. However, this research offers experiential insights for educational stakeholders to better select, support, and sustain early career teachers working and living in rural, regional, and remote Australia.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university.

The research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: Elizabeth Mann

Date: 18th November, 2024

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No editor was used in the construction or editing of this thesis.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics

AEW - Aboriginal Education Workers

AIEO - Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers

AITSL- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

ECT – early career teacher

HDR – Higher Degree by Research

ITE – Initial Teacher Education

NSW – New South Wales

PD – Professional Development

PL – Professional Learning

PLC – Professional Learning Communities

PPCT - Process-Person-Context-Time model

PST – pre-service teacher

RRR – rural, regional, and remote

RTA – reflexive thematic analysis

SES – socio-economic status

WA – Western Australia

GLOSSARY

Audience – those who will attend to, engage and resonate with the text.

Beginning or graduate teacher – a recent graduate from an accredited initial teacher education program and has registered to teach.

Career change teachers – an experienced professional, in a field outside of education, who has chosen to retrain as a teacher and transitioned into the teaching profession.

Early career teacher – a teacher who has been teaching in the profession for up to five years.

Placement or practicum – professional experience in a school that is undertaken as part of the accredited initial teacher education program.

Pre-service teacher – a student undertaking an accredited initial teacher education program.

Rural, regional, and remote – Locations outside of Australian capitals and major cities that can be characterised as country, isolated, the outback, the bush, the sticks. Defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as (ABS, 2021) "Remoteness Areas divide Australia into five classes of remoteness on the basis of a measure of relative access to services. The five remoteness classes are: Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote".

Special authority to teach – individuals, who are not registered to teach in Australian education systems or are undertaking an accredited initial teacher education program, are authorised to teach in a school that cannot find a fully registered teacher to fill a position.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Exposition

Teachers shape the future of Australia, but their work is inherently challenging (Heffernan et al., 2019). Australian teachers face heavy workloads, high expectations, stagnant salaries, and limited appreciation for their efforts (Hunter & Sonnemann, 2022a; McCallum et al., 2017; Windle et al., 2022). These factors, coupled with administrative burdens and dwindling morale, contribute to increased stress and burnout (Hine et al., 2022; Hunter & Sonnemann, 2022a; Longmuir et al., 2022; McCallum et al., 2017; Windle et al., 2022). Mockler (2022b) cautions that "what we're seeing now is an almost perfect storm of teacher shortages, unsustainable workloads, and pandemic-related burnout" (p. 15). Teachers are often left scrambling in survival mode, with their passion and potential being squeezed out by systemic issues, quick fixes, and large-scale reforms. Recently, the Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP) cautioned that "there are greater expectations placed on teachers than ever before…For many teachers, these demanding times were a tipping point to walk away, bringing forward long-projected endemic teaching shortages" (Department of Education, 2023, p. 6).

During the first five years in the profession, the new 'reality' and responsibilities of teaching can be daunting, overwhelming, and shocking for early career teachers (ECTs) (McCormack et al., 2006). They must navigate complex professional responsibilities, develop their skills, and manage intense workloads. Suggested attrition rates among ECTs are alarmingly high, with estimates ranging from 8% to 50% within the first five years (Buchanan et al., 2013; Weldon, 2018). The factors driving this attrition include unstable work/life balance, heavy workloads, the increasing complexity of teacher's work, job dissatisfaction, and experiences of stress and burnout (AITSL, 2021; Carroll et al., 2022; Goddard & O'Brien, 2003; Kelly et al., 2019; Kidd et al., 2015; Whiteford et al., 2021). Attention must be given to keeping teachers well and supported, so that the teaching profession will be sustainable (McCallum & Price, 2015).

The Australian teaching profession is facing a significant crisis, marked by numerous challenges that have garnered considerable attention from the media, researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders (see Figure 1 for research media headlines). "Whether it's disparaging remarks made by politicians; blame for crises both educational and social; or allegations of political bias and indoctrination of students, teachers seem to cop it regularly in the media" (Mockler, 2022b, p. 15).

News media and politicians are the predominant storytellers, dominating a false narrative of views and opinions about teachers and education and seldom affirming the benefits, rewards, and successes of the profession; within this context it is the teachers' voices that are often unheard (Shine, 2015).

Figure 1: Print media headlines covering Australia's teacher shortage
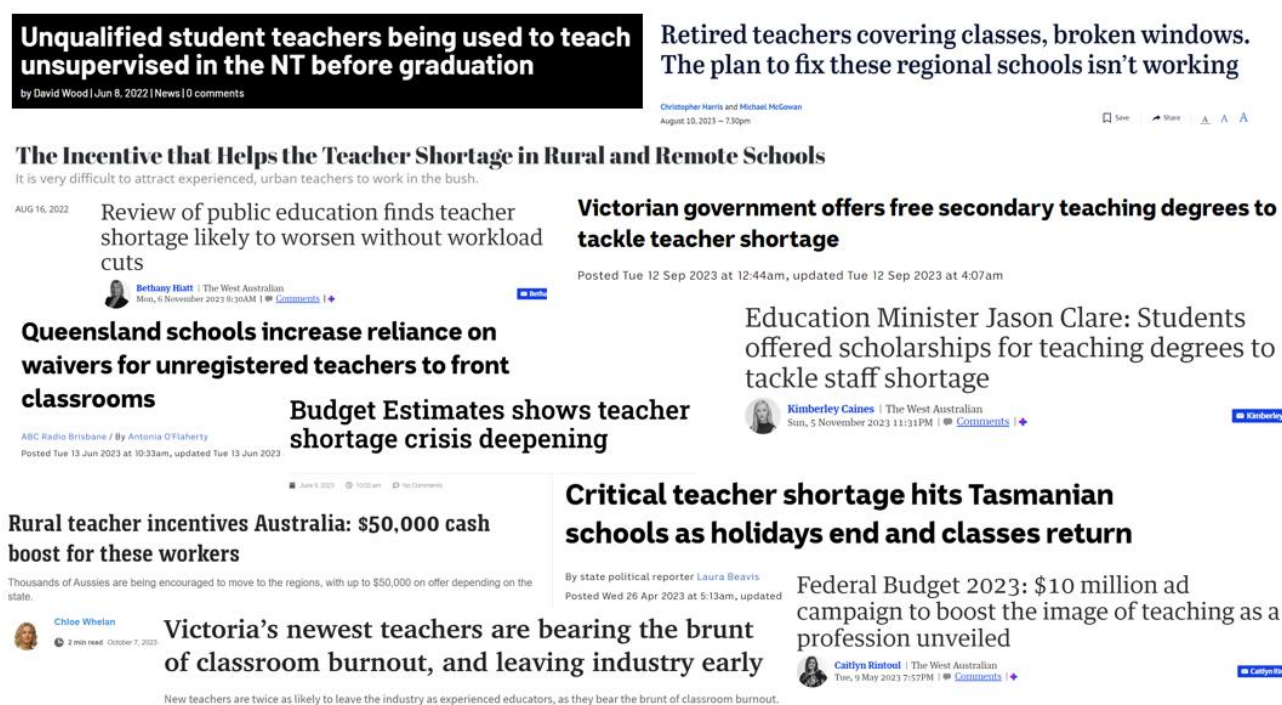
National teacher shortages are impacting students, teachers, and communities. The Australian Government has acknowledged the urgency of this crisis, the need to attract, recruit, and retain in the teaching profession is an "immediate national priority" (Department of Education, 2022, p. 4). A current approach to help alleviate the national teacher shortage includes placing unqualified and unregistered individuals in classrooms, such as the Special Authority to Teach (SA); Authority to Employ (NT), Permission to Teach (Qld). Permission to Teach Grant (Vic), Limited Registration (WA), and Limited Authority to Teach (Tas). These short-term responses risk undermining the quality and sustainability of the teaching workforce (Morrison et al., 2022).

There is a pressing need to address the attraction and recruitment of new teachers, but also the retention of the current teachers in the profession, especially in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) Australia.

The enduring issues of attracting, recruiting, and retaining teachers in RRR areas makes them harder to staff, which is further exacerbated by the national teacher shortage (Halsey, 2018a; The Productivity Commission, 2023; White, 2019). This is concerning as approximately one-third of teachers work in RRR Australia, providing education to almost one million Australian students, a quarter of Australia's student population (AITSL, 2022; Halsey, 2023). Roberts (2004) warned back in 2004 that "if the living and working conditions of teachers in these communities continue to compare negatively to their metropolitan colleagues there is no hope of attracting them to or retaining them in these communities" (p. 6), a situation now exacerbated by the current teacher shortage across Australia (Lampert et al, 2023).

One avenue for expediting teaching supply in RRR areas involves attracting career changers, or mid-career changers, with scholarships and accelerated teaching degrees. One fast-tracked apprenticeship-based pathway, funded by the Australian Government's High Achieving Teachers program, is the Leadership Development Program (LDP). Delivered through Teach for Australia (TFA), LDP accelerates entry into the teaching profession for career changers or high achieving individuals, delivering six weeks of formal, intensive preparation before placing them into RRR schools during their two years of teacher training. According to the TFA Impact report, more than 1450 teachers were placed in classrooms over 14 years; in 2023, 64% of LDP teachers were placed in RRR classrooms with 40% of alumni continuing to work in RRR areas (Teach for Australia, 2023). As LDP teachers are only required to fulfil their two-year teacher training period, TPA alumni can choose to leave; this might explain the 60% of alumni not continuing to work in RRR areas. White (2019) likens this incentive to transfer system of "country points except, instead of a 'better' school, the pathway is paved to a better paying job" (p. 150). Another concern is the immense, yet precarious, responsibility entrusted to LDP teachers, comparable to an IST, who are yet to complete their teacher training qualifications (White, 2019). TFA's programs have been criticised for conveying the message that it only takes six weeks to learn how to teach; Evans (2016) questions if "these freshly-minted rookies, often from fairly affluent backgrounds, really have the skills and nous to relate to disadvantaged children?" (p. 14).

The sustainability of RRR communities is closely tied to the attraction and retention of teachers, making this an urgent issue for all educational stakeholders (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). Despite the extensive policies, reports, reviews, and studies of the issues, challenges, and successful approaches, the perennial challenge of staffing RRR schools in Australia persists (Downes & Roberts, 2017a). One common staffing trend is the high proportion of unprepared and inexperienced early career teachers (ECTs) recruited to fill RRR positions (Carroll et al., 2022;

Halsey, 2018a, 2019). Financial incentives designed to attract and recruit ECTs to these areas appear ineffective as retention rates are alarmingly low (White, 2019).

The uniqueness, nuances, and complexities of Australian RRR areas requires improved and specialised preparation, selection, and support to new and experienced teachers to live and work in these communities (Gibson, 1994; Halsey, 2019; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). Contextual factors, such as the RRR community and school location and demographics, can influence ECTs' risk of stress and burnout, as well as attrition rates (Carroll et al., 2022; Weldon, 2018). Attention should focus on encouraging ECTs to perceive their RRR experiences with optimism, satisfaction, and nostalgia (Baills et al., 2002). There is a collective responsibility to ensure that ECTs are better prepared and supported as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of working and living in their RRR communities (Morrison, 2013; White, 2019).

Although research, reports, and reviews have contributed to our understanding of the challenges and opportunities to attract, recruit, and retain ECTs in RRR areas, the question remains - why do these staffing and retention issues persist? "Given that these issues have been perennial and intractable…it would seem that it is about time we try something different" (Downes & Roberts, 2017a, p. 46). A different approach is needed, "it's time to flip the system" (Hargreaves et al., 2018, p. 97) and a starting point to seeing from a different perspective is to investigate in depth the lived experiences of ECTs as they engage in their early years of teaching in RRR locations.

1.2 Research purpose and significance

Existing Australian literature has contributed to our understanding of ECTs and of RRR teaching. Early studies in the field of graduate, beginning, and ECTs' experiences in RRR Australia (e.g. Baills et al., 2002; Crowther et al., 1989; Gibson, 1994; Higgins, 1992) may be over 20 years old, however, it highlights the ongoing issues with attracting and retaining ECTs to RRR areas and the need to update research. While previous research has examined ECTs working in a rural, regional or remote location, most research has been from within one locality rather than from across multiple Australian RRR areas and at a single point in time. To date, there appears to be no longitudinal qualitative research on ECTs from different RRR areas in Australia nor any focusing on ECTs' experiences of working *and* living in these locations.

Green and Reid (2021) highlighted that "preparing new professionals for life and work in rural and remote settings has a less than satisfactory history in terms of its efficacy and success" (p. 29). They promote the need to better understand the nature and influence of rural place and space on those working in rural contexts. Reid et al. (2010) proposed a model of Rural Social Space to acknowledge the importance of economic, geographic, and demographic factors and the complex interaction of these on the experiences of those living and working in rural places and spaces. This research seeks to understand how factors, such as those identified by Reid et al. (2010), interact with personal and familial characteristics of ECTs as they commence their teaching careers in RRR locations.

While some RRR schools are viewed as desirable teaching locations, many are considered hard to staff and Lampert et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of "gaining deeper understandings of the day-to-day work of teachers in hard-to-staff schools allows policymakers, government and school leaders to gain crucial knowledge about how to address the challenges of retaining teachers" (p. 117). Of particular interest to this research is exploring in depth the day-to-day work and lives of six ECTs in RRR locations and how this affects their wellbeing and decisions on whether to remain or leave.

To consider the interactions between the personal and the rural place and space the research draws on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In seeking to present a holistic, intricate picture of ECTs' stories and experiences of working and living in RRR Australia across one school year a longitudinal qualitative research design was employed.

This research aims to explore and understand the factors that influence ECTs as they reflect on their experiences of work and life during one school year in RRR Australia. This thesis will answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in RRR areas?*

For research to be impactful and meaningful, it must provide fresh insights, enriched understanding, contribute to the ongoing conversation, and offer tangible benefits to those within the community of practice (Bazeley, 2021). With the ongoing teacher shortage and RRR staffing issues, the media's negative portrayal of the teaching profession, and in a time of data-driven educational reforms, policies, reports, reviews, and research aiming to address the teacher crisis, two things are evident. The rich, nuanced, complexities of teachers' experiences are not easily captured and quantified by a statistic, figure, or percentage. As noted earlier, the voice of teachers appears unheard among these narratives. RRR ECTs should be a part of the broader conversation surrounding the future of RRR staffing; their voices and stories need to be listened to, shared, and valued if we are to successfully address the issues, shortages, and crisis facing the teaching profession. The stories and voices of the ECTs will provide a rich, holistic sense of their world, highlighting the intricacies of their work and lives in RRR areas. By foregrounding the voices of ECTs, this research challenges the prevailing narratives dominated by media, governments, and universities. It advocates for a shift towards valuing and respecting teachers' experiences, especially ECTs' stories, thereby honouring and advocating within the profession.

The longitudinal qualitative research design will generate fresh insights from the ECTs' reflections on their RRR experiences, significant moments, shifts in their wellbeing, and growth from the beginning and the end of a school year. The research will acknowledge alignment with existing research and theoretical models. New knowledge will be generated from the comparable and contrasting stories of working and living in different RRR locations. Findings will contribute a deeper understanding of the complexities of ECTs balancing their work and life and holistic professional and personal support they need to not just survive but to thrive in RRR areas. This research offers a novel approach to re-presenting qualitative findings and provides an outline of the process undertaken for shaping research portraits and crafting research poems to help guide future researchers. The insights gained from this research can offer actionable insights and possibilities for educational stakeholders (e.g. governments, ITE programs, schools, leaders, and experienced, early career and pre-service teachers) for attracting, retaining, and supporting ECTs in RRR Australia.

1.3 Overview of the methodology

To answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' working and living in rural, regional, and remote Australia?,* longitudinal qualitative research will afford the rich detailed exploration of six early career teachers' experiences and interactions in their context. From the semi-structured interviews collected in Terms 1 and 4 of a school year, research portraits, shaped from the early career teachers' words, will capture the compelling idiosyncratic stories of each ECT's RRR experience. Themes generated from reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006), will be analysed across the layers of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theoretical framework and crafted into research poems, encompassing the holistic essence across all of the ECTs' rich meaningful experiences.

Throughout this thesis, the abbreviations RRR and ECT will refer to rural, regional, and remote and early career teachers respectively. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), rural, regional, and remote locations in Australia are categorised into 5 types of remoteness: Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote Areas and Very Remote Areas based on its access to services. The term early career teachers will be used to describe "teachers in their first five years of teaching" (McKenzie et al., 2014, p. xxiv).

To ensure that my research is focused, manageable, and achievable within the requirements of a Doctor of Education thesis and word-count, the scope of this research has four main parameters: participants will be ECTs who are in their first five years of teaching in the profession; they must be living/residing in a RRR Australian area as stipulated by the ABS (2021); currently working/teaching in their RRR area; and consent and available to be interviewed at the end of Term 1 and end of Term 4 in one school year. The purposeful sampling parameters are detailed in Chapter 3's Research Methodology and Methods.

1.4 The researcher, the teacher

The social life…well that revolves around teaching
and teaching is driving me nuts at the moment.
I love the kids…they are champions
BUT it's all the extra work
such as marking, reports, phoning parents,
organising sports teams, preparing work for kids
it takes up so much time.
Some of my friends have given up on seeing me because I'm so busy,

I'm deciding not to teach next year!

**A poem crafted from my email correspondence to friends
in my second year in the teaching profession (July, 2007)**

Throughout the research process "stands the biographically situated researcher" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). Blaikie (2009), Lofland (1984), and Silverman (2013) advise to start with "me" and where I am; my motives, what matters to me, what I care about. My personal biography situated me, the researcher, and informed my research approach and questions.

As an experienced teacher who mentors, coaches, teaches, and supports pre-service and early career teachers, and having worked in various educational settings, including regional schools, I bring a personal understanding of the challenges and rewards associated with teaching in these contexts. This background fuels my passion for exploring the experiences of ECTs and offers me insights into the nuances of their professional journeys. However, my familiarity with the field also necessitates a conscious effort to mitigate any biases that may influence my research. I acknowledge that my background, experiences, and beliefs are of influence on my interpretations of the data, but maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process assisted me to remain aware of my positionality and its potential impact on the research. By engaging in ongoing reflexive practice, I aimed to ensure that my interpretations remain substantiated in the data and reflective of the ECTs' authentic voices.

In this research, I occupy a position between insider and outsider. As a fellow teacher, I share certain experiences and understandings with my participants, which can facilitate rapport and a deeper level of engagement. However, I am also aware that my current role as a researcher positions me as an outsider to their immediate professional contexts. This dual perspective allows me to approach the research with both empathy and critical distance. I endeavoured to approach

this research with an open mind and a commitment to accurately representing the ECTs' voices, while remaining aware of how my own presence and interpretations may shape the findings. Engaging in continuous critical reflection enabled me to navigate this fluid positionality and to better understand its implications for the research.

1.5 Thesis structure

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis is explored for it relevance to this research in Chapter 2. It offers a holistic and multifaceted approach to understanding the ECTs experience of working and living in RRR areas through their bidirectional interactions with their nested contextual systems and accounting for the ECTs' personal dispositions. In the thesis chapters that follow, the bioecological theory will shape the narrative literature review (Chapter 2), inform the longitudinal qualitative research methodology (Chapter 3), guide the interpretation and analysis of the findings from the interview data (Chapters 4 and 5), and frame the discussion and conclusion (Chapter 6).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This research aims to explore and understand the factors that influence ECTs' experiences of working and living in RRR Australia during one school year. This chapter will review the previous and current Australian literature on ECTs and RRR education contexts. Framed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), this narrative literature review will describe, interpret, and synthesise the existing Australian research and illustrate how ECTs' proximal processes, personal characteristics, contextual factors, and the timing of experiences can influence their RRR experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

This chapter commences with a brief outline and justification for adopting a narrative literature review. Following is an in-depth review of the bioecological theoretical framework which segues into three subsections aligned to the PPCT model: process, person, context, and time. Within context, each of the nested systems of influence are explored, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The chapter concludes by encapsulating the gaps identified in the existing Australian literature that informed and justified the aims of my research.

2.1 Narrative Literature Review

A narrative literature review was adopted to provide a comprehensive description, interpretation, and synthesis of the existing research. It provides the opportunity to scope the previous and current literature on ECTs and RRR Australian education contexts, and creates a practical, readable, and coherent synopsis that provokes thought and discussion in the audience, as well as identifying areas that require further research (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green et al., 2006).

To scope the existing literature to answer my research question '*What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?*', parameters were set to narrow the focus of my search efforts. Databases (i.e. Scopus, ProQuest, Informit) were searched using the terms listed in Figure 2 from 1989 through to 2024, capturing existing Australian literature from the past 35 years. Essential selection criteria included Australian literature that sampled ECTs, and/or RRR Australia, as well as variations of these terms (detailed in Figure 2) Search terms were identified through the titles and abstracts of peer-reviewed journals as a priority, then government reports and policies, and literature reviews that meet the criteria. Literature was eliminated that was

not suitable for this literature review's purpose, such as literature on overseas ECTs and experienced teachers.

Figure 2: Search terms for narrative literature review

RRR Areas	ECTs	Person	Microsystem	Mesosystem	Exosystem	Macrosystem
•Australia •rural •regional •remote •country •isolated	•Australia •early career teachers •beginning teachers •graduate teachers •neophyte teachers •novice teachers •new teachers	•dispositions •characteristics •abilities •knowledge •skills •experience •resources •motivation •personality •temperament •biological	•leaders •principal •colleagues •staff •students •mentor •parents •carers •family •friends •husband •wife •partner	•work-life balance •demands •workload •home •school	•universities •initial teacher education •government •community	•generalisations •assumptions •misconceptions •myths •stereotypes •clichés •prejudice •media •representations •misrepresentations

Underpinning the narrative literature review, Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological model was chosen as an appropriate theoretical framework for the comprehensive description, interpretation, and synthesis of the existing research. It draws together the different personal characteristics and the various contextual influences, both immediate and distal, and how these components interact and affect one's development across time. The following section outlines Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development and frames the existing literature within the personal and contextual factors that influence ECTs in RRR areas.

2.2 Bioecological theoretical framework

In his original ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner (1977) proposed "A broader approach to research in human development is proposed that focuses on the progressive accommodation, throughout the life span, between the growing human organism and the changing environments in which it actually lives and grows" (p. 513). Its central focus was the five nested contextual systems in which development occurs: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The ecological model continues to be applied as a theoretical framework in recent Australian educational research. Price and McCallum (2015) analysed the ecological influences on pre-service teachers' wellbeing and fitness. Informed by the ecological model, Askell-Williams' (2017) research explored complex contextual systems that facilitate or hinder the sustainability of educational initiatives which support students' mental health and wellbeing. Lampert et al. (2023) applied an ecological perspective to the experiences of teachers working in RRR hard-to-staff

schools. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model provides a framework for educational research to highlight the sociocultural environments that influence one's growth and development. However, when reviewing and expanding on his ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), Bronfenbrenner acknowledged that one's immediate and wider contexts which influence development "do not tell the whole story" (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p. 570).

The essential elements of a story contain the characters (microsystem), the plot (mesosystem), the setting (exosystem and chronosystem), the theme (macrosystem), and the conflict (influences of the interactions). At the heart of a story is the main character; it appears that Bronfenbrenner was overlooking the backstory, personality, thoughts, feelings, and agency that play a role in an individual' development in addition to their context. Subsequently, Bronfenbrenner's *bio*ecological theory incorporates the continuity and changes in the biopsychological (e.g. one's temperament, dispositions, and resources) characteristics of the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). While still encompassing the nested systems of influence which affect one's development at any given time, the bioecological theory now recognises the bidirectional and reciprocal interactions between individuals and their contexts and the active role one has in shaping their own development (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). At the heart of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory is the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model, the interdependent, yet synergetic interactions of proximal processes, personal characteristics, contextual factors, and the timing of experiences that shape development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) (Figure 3).

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and the PPCT model was the ideal theoretical framework to shape my narrative literature review. It provides a holistic and multifaceted approach to sketch the existing research landscape and illustrate how systems of influence are subjectively experienced by the ECT living and working in the RRR context. These personal and contextual factors can also influence ECTs wellbeing, enabling some ECTs to thrive and flourish in RRR areas, while others experience challenges and view themselves as surviving rather than thriving.

Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time model related to early career teachers' development and experiences in rural, regional, and remote Australia
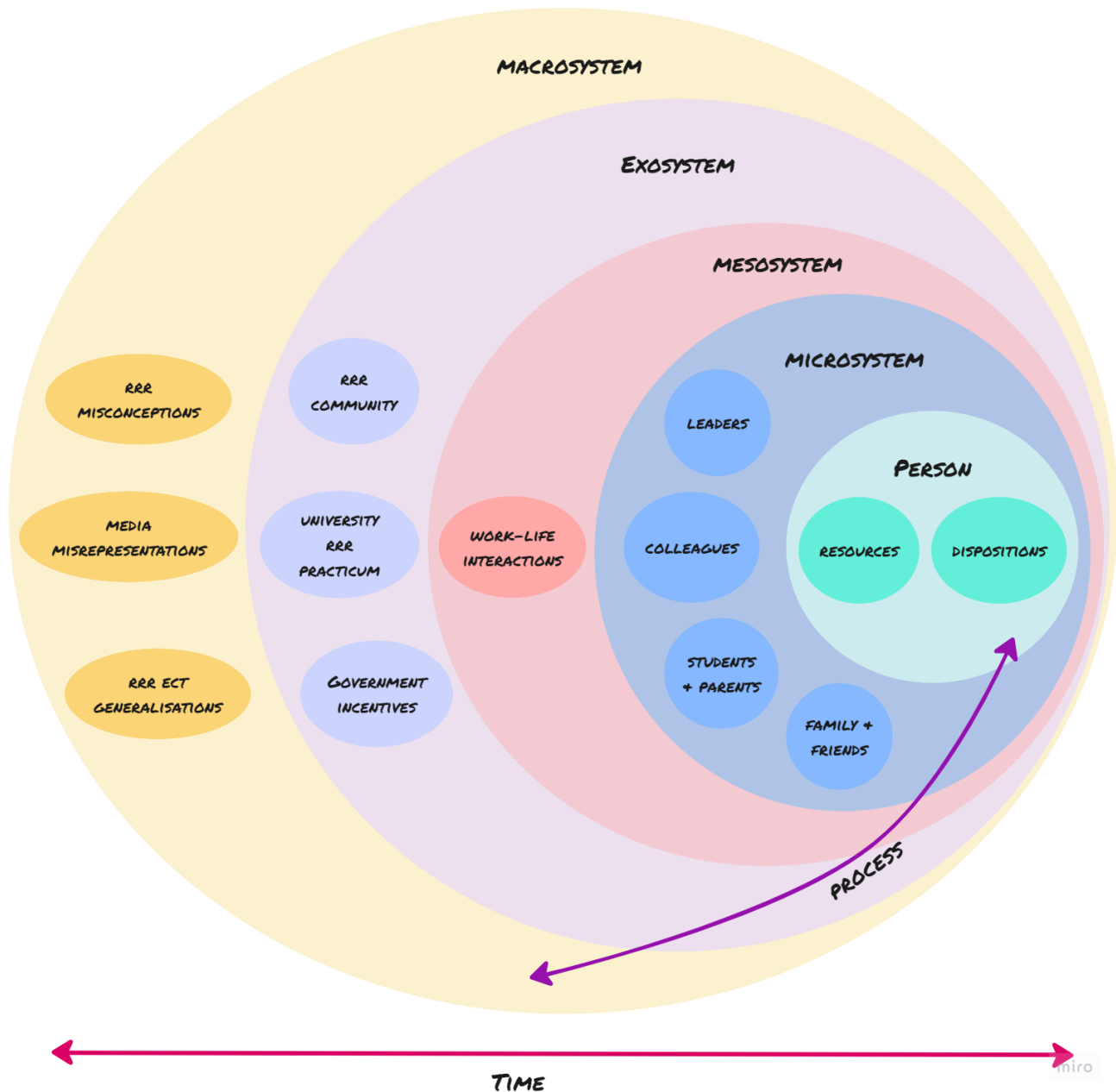
2.2.1 Process

Process, more specifically proximal processes, involves the bidirectional and reciprocal interactions between individuals and their contexts that influence development and experiences across time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). ECTs' proximal processes could include interacting with their RRR community, such as ongoing engagement in local organisations, groups, events, and projects, which both contribute to ECTs' development and the wider community. Proximal

processes can vary in their complexity (positive challenging interactions), reciprocity (interactions), duration (timely interactions), and frequency (consistent interactions) (Navarro et al., 2022). Respectively, examples of ECTs' proximal processes may entail transitioning in to the profession, collaboration with colleagues, and ongoing mentoring practices. In their review of Bronfenbrenner's proximal processes, Merçon-Vargas (2020) propose that inverse proximal processes occur, in which "enduring forms of detrimental interactions in the immediate environment that take place over extended periods of time on a fairly regular basis, becoming increasingly more complex" (p. 329). These dysfunctional interactions could lead to unhealthy, negative developmental outcomes (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020). For ECTs, this could involve dealing with challenging students or parents, ad hoc support from staff, and completing ongoing work demands at home.

What follows is a narrative literature review of the Person-Context-Time components within the existing literature on Australian ECTs and RRR areas, while weaving the Process (proximal processes) interactions throughout.

2.2.2 Person

The *Person* in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model can provide a nuanced understanding of how ECTs' individual dispositions, resources, and demand characteristics can influence their current and future growth and development, and their interactions in RRR contexts. Resource characteristics include an ECT's abilities, knowledge, skills, and prior experience, as well as mental and emotional resources required for facilitating their development and interacting in their RRR context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). ECT's active behavioural dispositions are the cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational factors connected with their motivation, persistence, and temperament. Dispositions, for example, curiosity, eagerness, and resoluteness, can promote development and interactions (proximal processes), and continue their momentum (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Linked to temperament, demand characteristics, such as ECTs' being easy-going and flexible, or reserved and cautious, can invite or discourage interactions with others and influence how proximal processes are established (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Demand characteristics include biological features, such as age, gender, skin colour, and physical appearance, which are not explored in this review although acknowledged as of influence. Together, an ECT's personal characteristics interact with their RRR context and development, shaping the individual's growth and experiences across time. The following paragraphs review existing Australian literature on the person level factors connected to ECTs in their contexts.

Previous research associated with ECTs' person-level factors has focused on resilience in their professional work. Linked to one's wellbeing, resilience is defined as:

> the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities, predominant among them (a) the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world, (b) the availability and quality of social resources, and (c) specific coping strategies. (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 1)

Converging the findings from their research, Ewing and Manuel's (2005) paper explores the key moments in ECTs' development. They propose that a "resilience factor" could help explain how and why some ECTs, who experience physical, intellectual, and psychological work-related stress, will successfully thrive and persevere through challenges while others feel overwhelmed and struggle to cope (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). Peters and Le Cornu (2006) highlighted personal characteristics of successful city-based ECTs, including being passionate, proactive, interactive, collaborative, self-managing, communicative, interpersonal, and engaged in continued learning. ECTs in Mansfield et al.'s study (2012) identified 23 attributes, knowledge, and skills of resilient teachers, such as the capacity to bounce back, to cope, to adapt, and to remain positive and optimistic despite the challenges of work. Interestingly, their research Mansfield et al. (2012) recognised that ECTs implied that resilience is both a trait and a response to different contexts. Similarly, Miles and Knipe's (2018) findings showed that a successful ECT has a combination of personal attributes and experiences, as well as learning on the job. Perhaps resilience is the interplay of an ECT's innate person characteristics and the contextual environments in which they develop. While these studies highlight the dispositions and resources of ECTs' resilience, a question emerges as to whether ECTs in RRR contexts possess the resilience, dispositions and resources, in an unfamiliar and often more complex and challenging context.

ECTs face many challenges when navigating the realities, responsibilities, and demands of learning-to-teach, which can elicit feelings of shock, being overwhelmed, and frustrated, especially in diverse and unfamiliar contexts (Hazel & McCallum, 2016; McCormack et al., 2006). Despite McCormack et al.'s (2006) findings reflecting the teaching experiences of ECTs in city and rural areas, they recognised the:

> importance of context as a significant factor for these early career teachers to learn about and shape their practice. Although they were teaching in diverse settings and locations,

each presenting different challenges, most embarked on teaching with the same aims, philosophies, level of content knowledge, and intent. (p. 110)

Hazel and McCallum's (2016) appreciative study uncovered that ECTs had positive experiences and adaptation to RRR teaching when their personal approach or attitude was appreciation of rurality, open-mindedness, and familiarising themselves with the environment. A link can be drawn between demand characteristics and an ECT's personal approach or attitude to RRR contexts and their involvement and acceptance in the community. However, Hazel and McCallum's (2016) findings must be interpreted with some caution as participants were five ECTs from the same rural school who sought a rural teaching appointment, and four of whom had familiarity with the area.

Key researchers cited in this literature review collaborated in the GoingOk project (Willis & Gibson, 2020) to develop a digital personal reflective tool for ECTs. Two findings emerging from this project were of interest including that teacher resilience utilises personal, social, cultural, and contextual resources to navigate RRR teaching challenges (Crosswell et al., 2018) which connects with the different systems of the bioecological model. In order to either adapt to, or cope with, the challenges of RRR work, ECTs overly relied on their personal resources, compromising their resilience and their physical and emotional health (Willis et al., 2017). It appears that personal resources supported these ECTs when structural and cultural resources were not available or supportive.

Connections to the person-level characteristics are evident in Sharplin et al.'s (2009) research. They found that when ECTs relocated to RRR areas, their prior knowledge, understanding, and experiences shaped their expectations of their new context. Through their initial experiences, interactions, and interpretations of their RRR context, ECTs consider their compatibility between their personal characteristics and their RRR context, or their person-environment fit (Sharplin et al., 2009). Sharplin et al.'s (2009) conceptualised the person-environment fit as a blend of teacher coping strategies (their reactions to stress), personal attributes (their self-efficacy, commitment, and locus of control), and structures for work socialisation (their working relationships). Their findings showed that ECTs' successful integration in to RRR work and life exhibited personal qualities, such as persistence, commitment, resilience, and capability that helped them to adapt. Interestingly, some ECTs, who also displayed resilience, grappled yet coped with integrating into the RRR context. When aspects of their RRR contexts were "beyond their endurance and control" (p. 24) and they couldn't sustain the effort to continue working, some ECTs became increasingly alienated and chose to withdraw from both working and living in their RRR area (Sharplin et al., 2009).

This raises important questions about the limits of ECTs' resilience when tested beyond endurance, such as *how can ECTs maintain their motivation and effectiveness when faced with isolation, heavy workloads, and limited professional support?*" Further inquiry could explore if there were a tipping point where person-level characteristics are no longer enough, and contextual support from the micro-, meso-, and ecosystems levels become essential to better equip ECTs to survive but preferably thrive in these RRR contexts.

The literature highlights the complex interplay between the personal dispositions, resources, and demand characteristics and the RRR context in shaping ECTs' experiences. Collectively, these studies suggest that while personal resources are essential, they are often insufficient on their own in the face of the unique complex challenges experienced in RRR teaching. This provokes the broader question; how might schools, communities, universities, governments, and the education system better prepare, support, and sustain ECTs in RRR settings, ensuring that resilience is not just a survival mechanism but a pathway to thriving in the profession?

2.2.3 Context & Time

Within Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, the final two components of the PPCT model are *Context* and *Time*. Context encompasses the nested system of different contexts through which interactions between individuals and their environments can influence one's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). There are four interrelated contexts, ranging from close direct relationships to broader societal influences:

- ↓ microsystems refer to the immediate environments of ECTs, such as their RRR workplace and their home;
- ↓ mesosystems relate to the interconnections between two microsystems of the ECT, e.g. how their RRR workplace influences their home life and vice versa;
- ↓ exosystems apply to broader indirect influences outside of the ECTs' control but affect their development, such as the impact of governmental policies and interactions with the RRR community;
- ↓ and macrosystems represent the informal and implicit sociocultural beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that shape ECTs' development and experiences, e.g. the misconceptions and generalisations about RRR Australia (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

In Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the original chronosystem focused on developmental transitions during one's lifetime (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Now called Time, this component accounts for the timing of proximal process and its influence on development. Time comprises of three successive levels:

↓ microtime (continued or discontinued proximal processes);

↓ mesotime (reoccurring interactions between work and home life);

↓ and macrotime (indirect influence of evolving societal changes) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The following sections will explore the existing literature on Australian ECTs and RRR areas in relation to Context with Time interwoven throughout.

Microsystems. The microsystem, in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, is the immediate environments of ECTs, such as their classroom and school, and their home, that play a crucial role in their development. Sustained, reciprocal interactions, or proximal processes, with the immediate environment include engagement with individuals, such as colleagues, leaders, mentors, students, parents, family, and friends (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner suggests that microsystems encompass microtime or the continued or discontinued proximal processes in an ECT's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); for example, the formalised ongoing versus ad hoc inconsistent support for ECTs in their new school contexts. The following review will explore existing Australian literature on the microsystem factors and their interactions with ECTs in their contexts.

Person-level factors, such as social competence, play a role in an ECT's development of relationships and interactions within their microsystem. Mansfield et al.'s (2016) literature review of teacher resilience identified social competence as a personal resource for establishing relationships in an ECT's school context. The reciprocal nature of the person-level (ECT) and the microsystem (school community) interactions are further shown in Mansfield et al.'s (2016) literature review, which indicated that trusting, supportive relationships, such as teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-leader, can cultivate ECT resilience. Similarly, Johnson et al.'s (2014, 2015) research emphasised that school communities can enhance ECT resilience through nurturing their pedagogical and professional growth, developing teacher-student relationships, creating a sense of belonging, and endorsing the collective responsibility for supporting ECTs' wellbeing. Although around half of the ECTs in Johnson et al.'s (2014, 2015) research were from

RRR areas, the findings provide valuable insight into the critical role that interactions with members of the school community (microsystem) can play in ECTs' resilience and development.

In their interactions with the school community microsystem, commonalities exist between ECTs in the city and those in RRR areas when navigating teacher-student relationships. ECTs are committed to their students but grapple with managing challenging student behaviours and catering to their diverse physical, emotional, and academic needs (Buchanan et al., 2013; Peters & Le Cornu, 2006; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). However, one remote ECT in Sullivan and Johnson's (2012) research reported she experienced additional issues of multi-age classroom teaching and the transient nature of students; noting that developing relationships with transient students was particularly difficult. Furthermore, the city-based ECTs in both Buchanan et al. (2013) and Peters and Le Cornu's (2006) studies experienced difficulties with parents/carers, such as concerns regarding their inexperience, hostility, and disinterest in their child's learning. What stands out from the ECTs in these studies was the inadequate professional support from colleagues and leaders for managing challenging interactions with students and their parents/carers (Buchanan et al., 2013; Peters & Le Cornu, 2006; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012).

Another aspect of an ECT's microsystem, such as interactions with school leaders and colleagues, have been explored in the literature. ECTs felt confident, competent, and resilient when their professional relationships and networks offered support through "being listened to and emotionally supported, being offered advice and professional knowledge, being acknowledged and appreciated, having the realities of teaching confirmed and being professionally challenged" (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014, p. 111). Morrison's (2013a) study of 14 ECTs working in disadvantaged schools revealed that they perceived professional relationships as important to their development. Most experienced care, trust, confidence, and assurance from these interactions as these ECTs desired colleagues and leaders to perceive them as competent. Similarly, McCormack et al's (2006) city and RRR ECTs craved positive feedback or recognition from colleagues for their teaching skills and efforts, however, this acknowledgement was not forthcoming. Similar stories of inadequate or inconsistent professional support emerges from the research. A rural ECT from Morrison's (2013a) research shared that, despite efforts to establish connections to gain support and to overcome feeling isolated, "relationships of care and support, guidance and mentorship were all largely non-existent and [she] was left to navigate her experiences in isolation" (p. 129). Two RRR ECTs described their experiences of inadequate support, guidance, and mentoring in their hard-to-staff schools, especially as leadership were overwhelmed and reactive (Lampert et al., 2023). ECTs found the support from other ECT colleagues helped their resilience (McCormack

et al., 2006; Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014); there appears a solidarity when ECTs can corroborate and understand the realities and challenges in their shared experiences. From their findings of the issues facing ECTs, Shields and Kilgour (2018) emphasised that "whether the teacher has in fact been supported or not is not relevant to the study because it is the perception of lack of support for the teacher that is a key factor" (p. 34). What emerges from this literature is the importance of interactions in the school microsystem, especially ECTs' perceptions of professional support.

Another important microsystem for ECTs are their interactions with family and friends. These relationships can provide ECTs with personal support and influence their resilience (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). One of Morrison's (2013a) rural ECT participants felt professionally and personally isolated after moving from her family and friends, despite their support during her hardships. This is consistent with previous research that identified RRR ECTs' challenges with perceived or real isolation are multifaceted, including geographical, professional, personal, and social (Appleton, 1998; Dadvand et al., 2023; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Lock et al., 2012). Family and friends can be a source of support for RRR ECTs that helps them cope with their isolation (Crosswell et al., 2018; Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). Although Bronfenbrenner's microsystems involve immediate environments, it appears that interactions with distant family and friends can still provide the RRR ECTs with the support they need.

Overall, the literature emphasises the importance of ECTs' interactions in their microsystems and how these relationships can support or hinder ECTs' development. As person-level factors can influence the interactions in one's microsystem, it is worth exploring the personal characteristics of the members of the school community who shape the ECTs' growth, wellbeing, and experiences across time. The literature has not yet fully captured the interactions of RRR ECTs' microsystems beyond their school community. This raises important questions about how ECTs build friendships and navigate their interactions with spouses, partners, and/or children outside of their RRR work context.

Mesosystems. Bronfenbrenner (1994) explains that "the mesosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person" (p. 40). For RRR ECTs, the connections between their work and home life can influence their development. This section of the literature review will focus on the bidirectional mesosystem

of Australian ECTs and RRR teachers' work-life and the extent to which these work-life interactions occur across time (mesotime).

Recent studies have examined the wellbeing of a broad cross section of Australian teachers. Notwithstanding the relatively small samples of RRR and ECTs, the following studies offer valuable insights into the link between wellbeing and work-life balance. An emerging theme in McCallum's (2021) teacher wellbeing case study was life/work balance, referring to having the time to complete work during school hours. Health, another wellbeing theme, was perceived by teachers as the capacity to juggle the demands of school with family. Additionally, teacher wellbeing can be threatened when the limited time afforded to complete the exorbitant work demands leads to teachers finishing their work during their weeknights and weekends (McCallum, 2020). A possible explanation might be that teachers' life/work balance and health is contingent on accomplishing their work demands while at school to preserve their family time. A link can be drawn to mesotime as "a myriad of factors on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis can have a deleterious impact on one's wellbeing, some within one's control and some not" (McCallum, 2021, p. 733). Teachers in Hine et al.'s (2022) study associated wellbeing with managing the challenges of unrealistic work demands and spending time connecting with loved ones at home. Similarly to McCallum's (2021) findings, a regular experience for teachers included spending evenings and weekends completing excessive work-related tasks, consequently consuming their personal life and time with their family (Hine et al., 2022). Although these teachers grappled with workload demands, they recommended setting boundaries, such as limiting completing work at home, to keep a work/life balance and improve their wellbeing (Hine et al., 2022). A recent study by Vo et al. (2024) supports Hine et al. (2022) and McCallum's (2020; 2021) findings, reinforcing the importance of work-life balance for teachers' wellbeing. These studies clearly indicate a relationship between work-life balance and the wellbeing of Australian teachers, however, due to the smaller samples of RRR and ECTs, their experiences of work-life balance are blended amongst the larger teacher populations.

Sharplin (2009) and Sharplin et al. (2011) explored the interaction between work and non-worklife of teachers who relocated to teach in RRR schools, two-thirds of whom were ECTs. Drawing links with the bidirectional nature of mesosystems, Sharplin (2009) highlighted that relocating for their new RRR position had immediate and continued impact on the work and non-worklife of these teachers. Moving and settling into a new environment, either themselves or with partners and children, maintaining connections with distal family and friends, adjusting to the community and its accessibility to amenities and services can create "an immediate and on-going

impact on teacher quality of worklife from these experiences" (p. 208). Conversely, commencing their RRR teaching position, teachers often taught out of their field, with limited support and increased work demands, leading to working out-of-hours and feeling time-stretched. For teachers new to RRR schools, "time-based and strain-based demands spilled over from work to non-worklife domain. For most, these spillovers impacted negatively on non-worklife" (Sharplin, 2009, p. 212). In another paper from the same study, Sharplin et al. (2011) emphasised the significant stress experienced by newly appointed RRR teachers. ECTs struggled to set psychological and workload boundaries compared to the experienced teachers in this study. Interestingly, to cope with the persistent stresses and work demands of RRR teaching, teachers physically and psychologically withdrew but rarely at home. Weekend and holiday breaks from the RRR area, as well as taking personal leave from work, helped teachers regain their physical and psychological balance. Sharplin et al. (2011) claim that withdrawing from the RRR context is "an opportunity for recovery rather than escape" (p. 143); it could be argued that this is a band-aid solution and not addressing the root of the problem.

While the literature shows the bidirectional interactions between the work and life mesosystems of Australian teachers, research to date has neglected to specifically explore the experiences of ECTs' work and life mesosystem in RRR contexts. With a more nuanced understanding, ways in which schools, communities, universities, governments, and the education system help ECTs navigate and balance their work and life in RRR areas can be proposed.

Exosystems. The exosystem level of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model consists of the broader contexts that indirectly influence RRR ECTs' development. Although outside of their control, decisions made by Initial Teacher Education's (ITE) preparation for teaching in RRR contexts, government incentives to attract, recruit, and retain teachers to RRR areas, and the local RRR community can indirectly impact the experiences and development of ECTs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The following review will examine these exosystemic contexts and their effect on RRR ECTs.

While there is a significant body of research exploring pre-service teachers' (PST) preparation for RRR contexts, preparing ECTs for working and living in RRR contexts has received little attention. In a recent review of policies, reports, and research concerning Australian ITE programs preparing 'rural-ready' teachers, Roberts et al. (2022) found a "continued lack of engagement with rural and remote schooling in Australian pre-service teacher education and demonstrates the inadequacy of teacher education standards and curricula that do not attend to

the situation of rural and remote schools in this country" (p. 107). Findings revealed an absence of any compulsory ITE topic that specifically focus on preparing PSTs for RRR contexts, nor an elective topic that prepares PSTs prior to their self-nominated RRR practicum (Roberts et al., 2022). This is concerning as approximately one-third of teachers work in RRR Australia, providing education to almost one million Australian students, a quarter of Australia's student population (AITSL, 2022; Halsey, 2023). In a survey conducted by the Country Education Partnership, a not-for-profit organisation who support rural Victorian communities, ECTs felt their ITE programs didn't sufficiently prepare them for the complexities of RRR teaching contexts and professionally engaging with families and local communities; despite their previous practicum or living experiences in rural areas (Country Education Partnership, 2021). In Lock et al.'s (2012) study of experienced and ECTs' teaching and living in remote Western Australia (WA), those with RRR practicum experience were inspired to embark on RRR teaching; whether their practicum prepared these teachers is unknown. Interestingly, Boylan's (2010) study on 'tree-changers' (i.e. those who chose to relocate from the city to rural schools) revealed that three in four of these teachers hadn't any experiences of RRR teaching, yet they had independently visited and researched their chosen rural area prior to moving. Frid et al.'s (2008) study explored ECTs' employment movements between Australian metropolitan and RRR schools. They found that better personal, professional, social, and academic preparation could help ECTs adapt to working and living in the distinct social, political, geographical, and economic contexts of RRR Australia (Frid et al., 2008). Similarly, Lock et al. (2012) suggest that "intensive familiarisation" (p. 132) of the complexities of RRR teaching and living could be beneficial for teachers before commencing, and throughout, their teaching position. Kelly and Fogarty's (2015) analysis of existing government projects and policies emphasise that:

> teachers that are prepared for rural teaching – in terms of specific knowledge, values and attitudes, as well as general attributes – are more likely to remain teachers, where the most significant part of preparation is having had adequate professional experience in rural or remote contexts. (p. 8)

This literature raises an important point: the decisions made by universities and ITE program providers indirectly impact the development of ECTs' RRR skills and expertise, which can also indirectly impact a quarter of Australia's students in our RRR schools.

Government decisions can also indirectly influence the experiences and development of ECTs in RRR areas. Roberts' (2004) report on improving staffing in RRR schools provides an overview of the financial and non-financial incentives offered by the Australian Government to

attract, recruit, and retain teachers to RRR areas. Financial incentives include locality allowances, zone allowances, relocation subsidy, subsidised accommodation and utilities, additional paid leave, travel reimbursement, retention payments, reduction in HELP debts, and bonding agreements (Roberts, 2004). Non-financial incentives comprise of fast-track permanency, transfer points system, career advancement, induction and mentoring programs, and professional development and additional study opportunities (Roberts, 2004). Roberts (2004) concludes that "while these are and will remain essential components of any scheme to attract and retain teachers, they ignore the primary motivation of teachers to enter and remain in the profession; an enjoyable and rewarding career" (p. 58). It is important to note that many of the incentives cited by Roberts (2004) remain twenty years later, as does the enduring issue of attracting, recruiting, retaining teachers to RRR areas. Influenced by Roberts (2004) and Reid et al.'s (2010) research, both cited in this chapter, Kelly and Fogarty (2015) propose that a complex system of influences attract, recruit, and retain teachers to RRR areas. These includes external factors influenced by bureaucratic policies and government incentives (i.e. financial and non-financial incentives), and internal factors influenced by the context within an individual (e.g. personality traits, values, attitudes, and emotions) (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). A recent review of Australia's RRR incentives emphasises that:

> Incentivising the profession solely through external motivations ignores the character of professional practice: the desire to be able to perform the role one trained and prepared for. The existing approach fails to acknowledge the distinct nature of nonmetropolitan practice, and the preparation needed for these locations. Instead, financial incentives that dominate current policy run the risk of exacerbating the staffing problem. While they attract teachers, without preparation for the specificities of non-metropolitan practice, and recognition of this practice, teachers remain highly vulnerable to leaving after their mandated duration of service is complete. (Roberts & Downes, 2020, p. 4)

Both Kelly and Fogarty (2015) and Roberts and Downes (2020) note that government funding, projects, policies, and incentives focus on external factors and overlook the intrinsic factors, such as their motivation, skills, attitudes, knowledge, and experiences; these intrinsic factors appear to link with person level factors in the bioecological model.

Besides exosystemic government decisions, it appears that microsystems can influence teachers' attraction, recruitment, and retention to RRR areas. Boylan's (2010), Lock et al.'s (2012), and Lyon's (2009) findings highlight that partners' employment status, family benefits, and improved lifestyle influenced experienced and ECTs to accept and remain in RRR teaching positions; however, it is difficult to determine ECTs specific influences as these findings are

merged with experienced teachers. These studies suggest that government-led decisions appeal to material resources at the person level, rather than accounting for broader resource and demand characteristics, as well as the microsystems that influence the interactions and development of teachers in RRR areas.

The RRR community is another key aspect of ECTs' exosystems and can indirectly influence their experiences. Early studies have examined the interactions between RRR communities and ECTs; and although these studies appear dated, they establish the ongoing issues associated with these interactions. Baills et al.'s (2002) findings indicated that the RRR community's perceptions of ECTs can impact interactions, as:

> the high mobility rates of teachers within isolated/rural communities often leave the community questioning the quality and the importance of education within their area. It is often the attitudes and the action of the teacher, which further exacerbates this sensitive issue and leaves the community wondering is education important in our community. (p. 58)

Based on previous experiences, RRR communities may not invest their time or effort interacting with ECTs, which indirectly influences the ECTs' experiences in the RRR area. In Crowther et al.'s (1989) study, most of the ECTs had enriching interactions with their small close-knit community, including building friendships and embracing the lifestyle. However, several studies have noted that ECTs new to the RRR area can find their interactions with the community problematic. Common experiences included not fitting in to the community, a clash of values, pressure to conform to social norms, the perceived close scrutiny of "living in a fishbowl, and being victims of the 'grapevine'" (Crowther et al., 1989, p. 13), leading to ECTs limiting or avoiding interactions with the community (Baills et al., 2002; Crowther et al., 1989; Gibson, 1994). Baills et al. (2002) suggest that ECTs and the community "bridge the gap" (p. 60) by fostering rapport, understanding, and flexibility to create a cooperative partnership.

From the literature reviewed here, it is evident that ITE programs, government incentives, and RRR community interactions can indirectly shape ECTs' RRR experiences. These studies raise the question: how might universities, governments, the education system, and RRR communities consider the person and microsystemic factors that also influence ECTs' development to ensure they survive and thrive in RRR areas?

Macrosystems. The macrosystem is the outermost layer of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Macrosystems describe the broader sociocultural beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that shape ECTs' development, perceptions, and experiences. Most macrosystems are informal,

implicit, and serve as "blueprints" (p. 515) held in the collective everyday conscience of society's members (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). For example, a common generalisation is that teaching is a relatively easy job with short workdays and lots of holidays (Shine, 2020). As society changes and evolves across time, so does the macrosystem, otherwise known as macrotime (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Teaching was once considered a vocation, a career for life; nowadays the profession appears less appealing when compared to other careers that offer better pay, work conditions, career progression, and respect (Watt & Richardson, 2008). This review will focus on the misconceptions of RRR Australia, the generalisations of RRR ECTs as transient, and media's misrepresentation of ECTs and the teaching profession.

Misconceptions, and generalisations of RRR Australia endure in the vernacular and understandings of rurality, often shaped by expectations (something will happen), experiences (knowledge from being there), media and societal narratives (Halsey, 2018b). The Australian consciousness has long-standing myths about 'the wide brown land', folklore creatures, the isolation, heat, and dirt – "the fear of the 'Outback'" (Reid et al., 2012, p. 64). Locations outside of Australian capitals and major cities can be characterised as rural, regional, remote, country, isolated, and also vernacular phrases of the outback, the bush, the sticks, woop woop, going inland, and the black stump (Halsey, 2018b).

Written in the early 1900s, Mackellar's (1971) iconic poem 'My Country' captures the essence of Australia's unique landscape, describing her appreciation of its natural rugged splendour and harsh realities. Australia has vast diverse terrain, unique flora and fauna, rich cultural heritage, and a propensity for unpredictable natural disasters. Mackellar portrays Australia as a land of beauty and resilience, a place where one can find inspiration amidst the vastness of nature and appreciation for its unique characteristics. Of course, inspiration may be reduced for ECTs depending on their personal dispositions and capacities, as well as if micro- and meso-system elements of importance were not accessible or in place. This highlights the interaction nature of all levels of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model.

Early research into the generalisations and misconceptions of RRR Australia paint a deficit picture. In a study examining ECTs' transitions to isolated/rural communities, Baills et al. (2002) reported that RRR communities were described as harsh, barren, and socially restrictive. Wallace and Boylan's (2007) review of research found that RRR areas were perceived as the "'unknown', 'to be feared', 'to be avoided'" (p. 22). These studies highlight that misconceptions stem from both a discrepant understanding of RRR communities and "an outsider's and often metro-centric view of

rural living" (p. 6). Wallace and Boylan (2007) stressed that a deficit perspective of RRR areas emerged from ECTs who were a "two year tourist teacher…doing their time, and escaping back to the city or the coast as soon as they can" (p. 5). Similarly, ECTs in Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist's (2004) study perceived their RRR teaching appointment as their "country service…their two-year 'tour of duty'…hardship duty…a career stepping-stone" (p. 3). Two large-scale reports have corroborated these temporary, transient teachers' generalisations. Reid et al.'s (2012) Australian Research Council project called 'TERRAnova' (renewing Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia) found that teachers believe their RRR appointment "as tickets to a 'better place'…only went there in order to get out" (p. 30). In Halsey's (2018a) review of submissions, reports, and literature identifying the key challenges of RRR education, a prevailing assumption is that "the country is a good place for a teacher to start their career but not to devote their career to" (p. 38). Additionally, the RRR community can draw assumptions about the ECTs in their schools. Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist (2004) reported that ECTs were nicknamed "two year tourists" (p. 3) by the local remote Aboriginal community as these transient teachers leave after two or three years. The RRR parents and students in Mills and Gale's (2003) study perceived ECTs as transient teachers as their commitment was "shortlived…here today and gone tomorrow… temporary and fleeting" (p. 147-149).

Of interest, Lampert et al.'s (2023) more recent research sought to determine why teachers stay in hard-to-staff schools. They were hopeful the stories from three teachers in rural and remote schools (two of whom were ECTs) would identify reasons for remaining in these RRR locations. However, beyond the aspirations of making a difference for their students the teachers identified many issues that created complexities and challenges in their work. They found that school culture, organisational practices and understaffing generated "day-to-day working lives [that] are hard, stressful and sometimes overwhelming" (p. 127). While the teachers involved in Lampert et al.'s (2023) research all intended to stay in the profession they questioned whether they would remain in the current RRR location. The factors leading to these teachers wanting to leave appear to be meso-level issues however, if the teachers did leave, it may reinforce the local community's perception that teachers move on due to locality rather than system-level issues, reinforcing a potential misconception.

Reid et al.'s (2012) project expanded on the generalisations and misconceptions of RRR Australia. The authors noted that:

> Australians safe in the comfort of the city have learnt to wake in fright through our songs and
> stories, our movies and media accounts. These paint pictures of drought and decline, of the

failure of rural schools to achieve educational outcomes comparable to those of city schools…we argue here, these are representations. They are not 'truth', and they are most certainly not the whole truth. (p. 64)

Untruthful, inaccurate, biased media representations of ECTs and the teaching profession have also perpetuated ongoing macrosystemic generalisations and misconceptions. Over the past decade, Mockler's (2019, 2022a, 2022b) and Shine's (2015, 2020) research analysed the portrayal of teachers in Australian newspapers. Their findings revealed that the Australian print media had an excessive focus on teachers, skewed towards negative generalisations and misconceptions often constructed and voiced by governments, politicians and unions (Longmuir et al., 2022; Shine, 2020). Teachers were the "collateral damage" (Mockler, 2022a, p. 167) in the political mudslinging for declining educational standards, teacher quality, and commitment to the profession.

These misconceptions, unfair criticisms, and barrage of blame undermine the profession's reputation, as well as teachers' morale towards their work and the profession (Mockler, 2022a). Mockler (2022b) warns that:

the general lack of respect expressed toward teachers in the public space doesn't help. It doesn't help attract the 'best and brightest' into the profession, an aspiration of successive governments of all persuasions and at all levels in Australia. And it doesn't help to keep talented and experienced teachers in the classroom. (p. 15)

This view is supported by Shine (2015, 2020) who suggested that print media's representations of teachers can both deter prospective teachers from entering the profession and encourage existing teachers to leave. In her analysis of ECTs' representations in Australian print media, Mockler (2019) noted a shift; once portrayed as the solution to the issues facing the teaching profession in the 1990s, nowadays sweeping generalisations place ECTs as the cause of the issues. These current generalisations help to justify the increased accountability, accreditation, and regulation of the teaching profession, as well as shaping public opinion and ECTs' development, perceptions, and experiences of the teaching profession (Mockler, 2019).

It appears that the invisible, implicit macrosystems, including the generalisations and misconceptions of ECTs and RRR Australia, have remained in the collective conscience and continue to shape the development, perceptions, and experiences of ECTs in RRR areas. What is missing in the literature is the focus on the benefits, opportunities, and positive experiences of the teaching profession, especially of ECTs who have enjoyed and remained teaching and living in RRR Australia. This could help challenge the enduring generalisations and misconceptions and

paint an improved portrait or 'blueprint' of ECTs, RRR Australia, as well as the teaching profession as a whole.

2.3 Wellbeing conceptual framework

A conceptual framework is "a representation, either graphically or in a narrative form, of the main concepts or variables, and their presumed relationship with each other" (Punch, 2009, p. 83). Wellbeing was the ideal conceptual framework to guide my research. It is a dynamic, flexible, multifaceted construct. The World Health Organization (2021) defines wellbeing as "a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions" (p. 10). Wellbeing is contextual: one must live well and work well. For teachers, wellbeing includes developing the psychological capacity to manage the normal stressors and demands within the profession (Falecki & Mann, 2021). However, "teacher wellbeing is not just an individual's responsibility, but it is a shared organisational, community and worldwide concern" (Falecki & Mann, 2021, p. 176).

The wellbeing conceptual framework, alongside the bioecological theoretical framework, informs the crafting of research questions, offers depth to the data analysis, and further insight to understanding the interactions between their different contextual systems and their influence on the development, wellbeing, and experiences of ECTs in RRR Australia during a school year (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Theoretical and conceptual frameworks related to early career teachers' experiences in rural, regional, and remote Australia
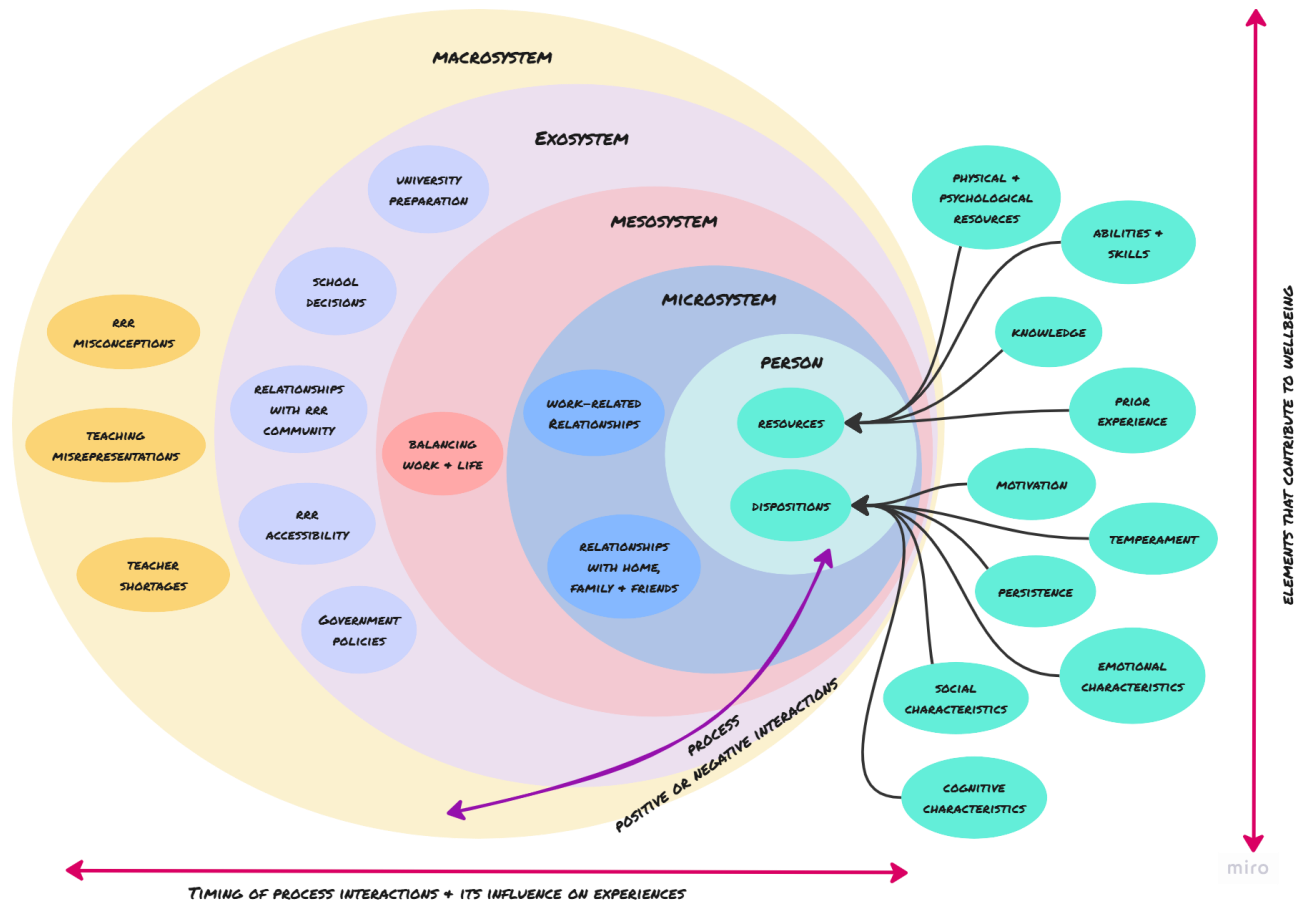
Summary. The nested systems of influence in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model provided a framework to analyse the existing Australian research in this narrative literature review. Collectively, the literature suggests that RRR contexts can influence the interactions of ECTs and, reciprocally, ECTs may also influence RRR contexts. These interrelationships play a pivotal role in supporting or undermining the experiences, wellbeing, and development of ECTs in RRR areas. Although a range of informative Australian literature has contributed to our understanding, there is a need to update research into ECTs in RRR Australia. Over the past three decades, calls for "more teacher stories" (Featherstone, 1989, p. 377), "to hear the voices of new teachers far more consistently than we presently do" (Ewing & Manuel, 2005, p. 13), and to "recognise the heart, soul, and mind of the teacher" (Goodwin et al., 2023, p. 722) appear to have gone unheard. ECTs' voices are an integral part of the broader conversation surrounding the future of RRR education. What has been overlooked in the literature is the resonant, nuanced, detailed exploration of ECTs' reflection on, and their stories of, their work and life experiences from the first term and the last term of one year of teaching in a RRR area. Teaching is profoundly human; at times, this cannot

be adequately captured through quantitative data alone. In light of the current teacher shortage, sharing the ECTs stories, their triumphs and their challenges, will offer important rich insights in to how their experiences, wellbeing, and growth evolve across time as they navigate their systems of influence in RRR areas. To address gaps identified in this literature review and researchers' recommendations, the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?* shapes the research design and seeks to generate ongoing contributions to the field.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

Chapter 2's Literature Review described, interpreted, and synthesised the existing Australian literature on ECTs and RRR education. Framed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the narrative literature review identified the gaps in the research, such as the need to update the longitudinal qualitative research in the field, to explore the experiences of more than one RRR location, and to give voice to the ECTs' rich, nuanced, and resonant experiences of working and living in RRR Australia during a school year.

This chapter will outline and justify the research methodology that aims to answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?* The chapter begins by describing the research paradigms and theoretical framework that guides this longitudinal qualitative research design. The methods of sampling the RRR ECTs, gathering the interview data, and analysing it through RTA are explained. The process of crafting the research portraits and research poems to present the findings is detailed, followed by outlining the approaches towards ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and the limitations and delimitations.

3.1 Social constructivism and interpretivism research paradigms

As a teacher who has worked in a number of varied contexts (detailed in Chapter 1), I believe individuals learn about their world through the interactions with others, their experiences, backgrounds, and cultures, and that these interactions shape the way they understand their world. My research aimed to explore and understand the factors that influence ECTs' experiences of living and working in RRR Australia, which includes how they construct their world/context and interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences, therefore social constructivism and interpretivism were foundational paradigms in this research. As often used in educational research, social constructivism and interpretivism paradigms have been combined or used interchangeably (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

Social constructivism highlights that reality is our own construction (Creswell, 2013); meaning is created through the social interactions of individuals and groups, and one's cultural, historical, and social contexts (Creswell, 2018). Knowledge and understanding are created through social interaction, shared meanings, and negotiated understandings. Individuals understand their

subjective contextual experiences by actively constructing knowledge, creating multiple meanings, concepts, and schemas to comprehend, organise, and navigate their multiple realities (Flick, 2009a; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994). This connects with the bioecological theory framing this research as ECTs' RRR experiences are influenced by the interactions between person and context at different times (see Chapter 2).

Interpretivism emphasises that reality is subjectively interpreted; meaning is created through the perspectives and experiences of individuals. "Experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside an individual which give rise to experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 15). Knowledge and understanding are created through an individual's multiple, subjective interpretations of their experience and the meanings used to understand their world (Merriam, 1998; O'Donoghue, 2018). Connections with the bioecological theory framing this research can be drawn as ECTs' interpretations of their RRR experiences are influenced by the interactions between person and context at different times and shared with me for further interpretation. My role in the interpretive process is discussed in more detail in the section on establishing trustworthiness in the research.

Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework and my research paradigms guided the exploration of the ECTs' interactions with their immediate and distal contextual systems, its influence on their RRR experiences during a school year, and their interpretations of these interactions and experiences. Tong and An's (2024) findings demonstrated that Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) has been applied as a framework in international education studies; these studies used research methodologies aligned to this research: interpretivism and constructivism (not social constructivism) paradigms, qualitative and longitudinal research, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis (not reflexive). This is supported by Tudge et al. (2009, 2017) and Navarro et al. (2022), who suggest that the bioecological theory is a comprehensive theoretical framework for longitudinal qualitative studies. Furthermore, my research paradigms connect with the decision to undertake qualitative research as it illuminates the meaning that individuals have constructed, interpreted, and attributed to their contextual, subjective experiences (Merriam, 2009).

3.2 Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research explores a phenomenon or event that needs greater understanding "from the interior" (Flick, 2009b, p. 66). Through describing and understanding how individuals

construct meaning and interpret their natural setting, qualitative research and data highlights the characteristics/qualities of an experience (Polkinghorne, 2005). Using qualitative research design allowed me to capture the setting and scenic details, the ECTs' personal characteristics and thoughts, their experiences in their everyday RRR lives/situations, the network of social interactions, and the contextual systems that operate and influence (Patton, 2014; Schultze & Avital, 2011; Taylor et al., 2015). A qualitative research design provided scope for innovative and flexible approaches in my research and informed my decisions for gathering and analysing data and presenting the findings (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Overview of research design
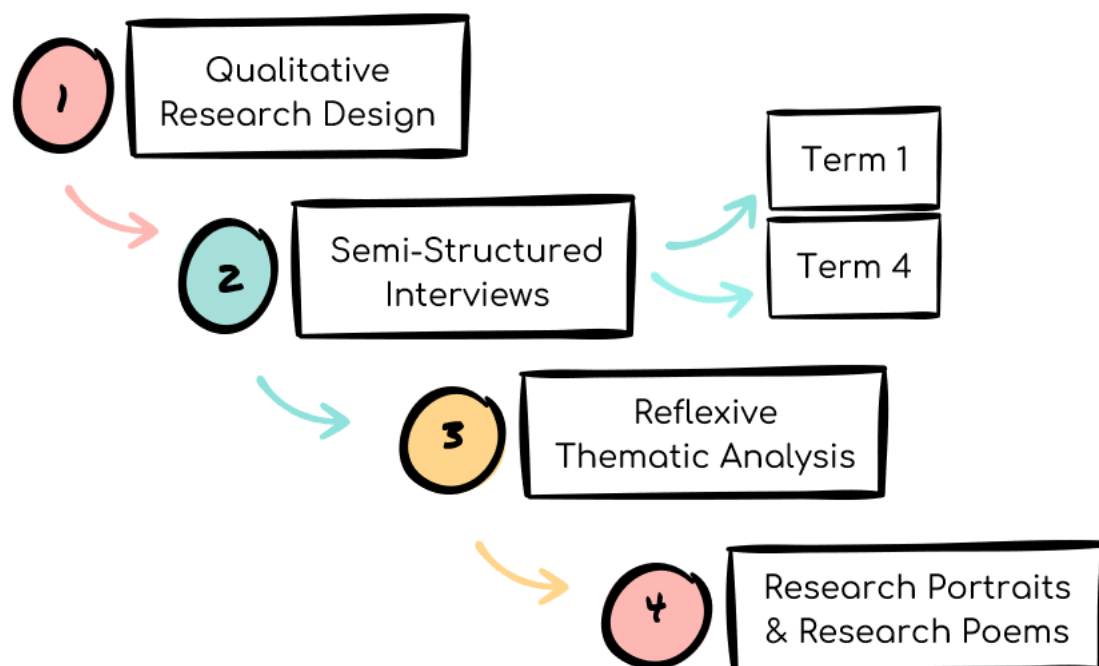
I chose a longitudinal qualitative approach to uncover "how human actions and participant perspectives might change during the course of a study to reveal temporal-based themes and patterns of human development or social process" (Saldana, 2003, p. 4). As both time and change are contextual; my research was not uncovering the "product of change" (Saldana, 2003, p. 8) from the ECTs, but the "process of change…a more temporal-based perspective that details the complexities of the journey" (Saldana, 2003, p. 8). My research findings provide "'snapshots' of teachers' perceptions" (Saldana, 2003, p. 4) i.e. the ECTs' experiences, wellbeing, and growth from the beginning to the end of one school year in RRR Australia.

Qualitative methods of in-depth interviewing endeavours to create detailed information from a small participant sample and understand the characteristics of human lived experience from a first-person perspective (Polkinghorne, 2005; Taylor et al., 2015). This approach generates holistic, rich, thick descriptions from the individual's own words (Merriam, 2009). The audience is invited to walk in the participants' shoes, "understanding their inner experiences and seeing things from their points of view" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 162). The context-specific uniqueness of individual experiences requires qualitative researchers to employ inductive approaches on the qualitative data; this can unpack the meanings, understandings, and interpretations that individuals ascribe to their context-specific experiences (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998; Leavy, 2017). Interview data is explored from the 'bottom-up'; as a qualitative researcher, I make interpretations to develop patterns, craft themes, and capture the essence and meaning of individual experiences in multiple, varied contexts (Azungah, 2018; Braun et al., 2019; Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). "Qualitative research is a craft" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 11) and suited my choice to transform my interview data into research portraits and my themes into research poems (detailed later in this chapter).

3.3 Data gathering

3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

Data gathering methods must be relevant to the research aim and question being explored (Silverman, 2013). To explore and understand the factors that influence ECTs' work and life in RRR areas, in-depth interviewing was selected. Qualitative in-depth interviews aim to engage individuals in conversation, to be in the mind of another, to unearth their understanding of their social knowledge and reality, their sensemaking and meaning-making of their world (Lofland, 1984; Schultze & Avital, 2011). Interviews are first-person stories of an individual's experience; the audience is invited into their perspective "as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of and accomplished by human beings" (Patton, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2005; Schwandt, 2007, p. 100). In their everyday spoken language, individuals reconstruct their personal and public worlds, creating rich descriptions that are contextual, unique, and authentic (Cope et al., 2015; Lofland, 1984; Polkinghorne, 2005).

I resonated with Seidman's (2019) belief on interviews:

I interview because I am interested in other people's stories… stories are a way of knowing…at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived

experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience…other individuals' stories because they are of worth. (p. 9)

Teachers have storied lives, shaped by the construction and reconstruction of their personal and social experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). ECTs told their own stories; their backgrounds and past experiences shaped their present perceptions, interpretations, and behaviour, as well as their future expectations (Cope et al., 2015; Kelchtermans, 2009). Both the ECTs' background and my background influenced our interpretations, of which I was especially mindful when analysing ECTs' interview data (Creswell, 2018; King & Horrocks, 2010; Mason, 2002).

As the ECTs' RRR locations ranged from a 3-hour to 23-hour drive away from my location, and to keep my data gathering methods consistent, I chose to conduct the interviews via telephone. With mobile phones and virtual communication being commonplace, telephone interviews were convenient for both my RRR ECTs and me (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Although Novick (2008) cautioned that telephone interviews can be perceived negatively compared with face-to-face interviews in qualitative research, successful qualitative interviewing does not stipulate that the researcher and participant-interviewee need to be physically present (Lechuga, 2012). The benefits of telephone interviews outweighed the potential limitations as:

- it enabled me to connect with geographically dispersed, difficult to reach ECTs, thus proving cost-effective and time-efficient (Carr & Worth, 2001; Haslerig, 2021; Lechuga, 2012; Novick, 2008; Oltmann, 2016).
- interviewing from home ensured a controlled environment and my safety and security compared with travelling (Carr & Worth, 2001; Oltmann, 2016; Stephens, 2007).
- using headphones (hands-free) and recording the interviews allowed me to note take, keep track of questions being answered (ECTs may digress or answer future questions), and unobtrusively tick the questions off (Creswell, 2007; Oltmann, 2016; Stephens, 2007).
- scheduling interviews that best suited the ECTs; they chose the time and location where they could be comfortable and relaxed for the interview conversation (Haslerig, 2021; Lechuga, 2012; Oltmann, 2016; Roberts, 2020; Stephens, 2007).
- it reduced interviewer effects, as face-to-face interviews can produce social desirability bias and interviewer effects (Carr & Worth, 2001; Oltmann, 2016).
- schools, universities, leaders, colleagues, students, and communities were discussed, the telephone may have offered perceived anonymity for ECTs, feeling relaxed and

comfortable when responding to my in-depth questioning (Haslerig, 2021; Lechuga, 2012; Novick, 2008; Oltmann, 2016).

- it resulted in a swift turnaround of interview data collection (Carr & Worth, 2001; Trier-Bieniek, 2012).
- face-to-face or Zoom interviews were not chosen for participant convenience, i.e. they were not required to set up a webcam, find a quiet video-friendly space, dress formally, have a stable internet connection.

During the telephone interviews, there were moments when the phone call lost connection, extraneous background noises made clarity difficult, and distractions/interruptions occurred at the ECT's location (Oltmann, 2016; Stephens, 2007); these were not within my control but were managed.

Interview questions aimed to provoke responses that answered my research question (Roberts, 2020). My intention was to assess across the whole data set (all ECTs) and within each data item (one ECT) (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I chose semi-structured open-ended interview questions as it elicited detailed, rich, nuanced descriptions and exploration of the ECTs' contexts, events, and individuals that influenced their lived experiences in RRR areas (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016; Galletta & Cross, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2005). When crafting my interview questions, I created an interview guide that resembled a flexible professional conversation to help me to steer the ECTs through their reflections and reconstructions of their socially constructed and interpreted RRR experiences, and ensure I answered my research question (Schultze & Avital, 2011).

Interview questions were framed in a positive and affirming way, asking for introspective, retrospective, and prospective reflection, and to create space for the ECTs to narrate their experiences. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) found that individuals who strive for success often lack the time to celebrate their accomplishments and reflect the context of their challenges. When asked to read and check the interview transcripts for accuracy, Fleur commented on the positive focus of the interview questions, confirming my belief this was a sound choice. In an email response, she replied:

> Thanks for the transcript, it was interesting reading...I must say a big thank you for the opportunity to take part in this research. Your focus on the positive aspects has really helped me consider how I can deal with potentially draining or negative situations in a positive light. (personal communication, February 22, 2020)

Term 1's interview questions commenced by gaining information about their journey into a teaching career and motivations and expectations for teaching, especially in RRR Australia (see Appendix 7). ECTs were asked about their wellbeing after Term 1, their satisfaction with balancing their work and life, and ways they maintain and enhance their wellbeing.

Aligned with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and guided by the dimensions of wellbeing, questions were positively framed with the assumption that ECTs had affirming experiences while working and living in RRR areas. Furthermore, questions were broad and general (Galletta & Cross, 2013), allowing ECTs to interpret the questions and construct their own meaning in their context. Reflections were on the experiences and interactions when they felt happiest, received and offered support, were engaged or passionate, showed determination or persistence, felt a sense of achievement or success and belonging, as well as connected with the community. To conclude the interview, questions invited ECTs to offer their thoughts, opinions, or suggestions regarding opportunities for other teachers to flourish in rural areas. They were invited to recommend strategies for supporting ECTs in RRR areas, how universities and governments could give better support, advice to offer other ECTs, and any further comments they wished to make.

In Term 4, interview questions focused on retrospective reflection on the year and prospects and their intentions for the following year (see Appendix 8). Questions were comparable to Term 1, positively framed and broad, such as recollecting experiences and moments when they flourished or felt happiest, received and offered support, were engaged at school or in the community, and successfully overcame a challenge. ECTs were asked what mattered most regarding their work and life in their RRR area, who or what has maintained and hindered their wellbeing, and the ways they could improve their wellbeing in the future. Closing questions asked the ECTs if they intended to remain in RRR areas, their reasons for remaining or leaving, and if they had any further comments they wished to make.

As the researcher-interviewer, I was aware to pose questions that could be understood and answered (Patton, 2002). During the conversation, if responses required elaboration to delve deeper and elucidate meaning, I rephrased the question or paraphrased their response (Charmaz, 2006). As a qualified coach, I am familiar with this technique and used it in my conversation with colleagues and students to convey their meaning back to them. With the ECTs, I captured the essence of their response and allowed the interviewee to hear what was said, to check for understanding, and encourage further discussion on their perspective (van Nieuwerburgh, 2020).

My approach to achieving effective interviews was to maintain awareness of the interview's flow, paying mindful attention to the ECTs' reactions to the questions and their responses, both the words and the tone of voice, and gauging their comfort levels (Bailey, 1987; Connelly & Peltzer, 2016; Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002).

Rogers (1995) suggests to deeply hear and listen, I must "hear the words, the thoughts, the feeling tones, the personal meaning" (p. 8) of others. When an ECT describes their experiences, I applied my coaching skills to empathetically listen and mindful not complete their sentences or guess, not interrupt but make encouraging sounds to show interest, and match their energy levels (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Patton, 2002; van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). Maintaining neutrality and being respectful without judgement was essential when ECTs' experiences were shared as "what they say is important because of who is saying it" (Patton, 2002, p. 365).

Before the interview commenced and the recording began, I briefed the ECTs about the flow of the interview, that they have the right to not answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable, the conversation will be recorded and transcribed, and if they needed anything clarified before beginning. This was to reassure them and remind them of their rights (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Once the interview recording concluded, I debriefed with the ECTs and explained the next phase of the research process (i.e. transcribing the recording, emailing them the transcript for verification) and any concerns they wished to clarify (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Although interviews facilitated the reflection on past and present experiences of working and living in RRR areas, it relied on ECTs' ability to recall, describe and articulate accurate information during the interview (Breakwell, 1990; Creswell, 2014; Mason, 2002). I was mindful that memories are reconstructions, not necessarily a retrieval or 'mirror image' of an experience. Unexpected interruptions and the call dropping out were limitations not within my control; for example, one ECT stated "I think I'm being beckoned by someone. I'm popping upstairs to let someone in, sorry. I'll keep talking". This may have disrupted the train of thought as attention was focused elsewhere (Stephens, 2007).

Interview transcripts were transcribed by an external company and then emailed to the ECTs to verify its accuracy and any additions or omissions they wished to make. There were moments in the transcription when the transcriber appeared uncertain of what was said, e.g. "So, things are going to plan, [unclear 10:20.8] everything is good". Additionally, I checked the transcripts with the audio recording to verify its accuracy, noticing that as individuals usually talk in

run-on sentences, punctuation and grammar was open to the transcribers, and my own, interpretation (Poland, 2001) (as detailed in the Trustworthiness section).

Of the six interviews in Term 1, an average of 21 questions were asked; interviews averaged 47 minutes. Of the six interviews in Term 4, an average of 12 questions were asked; interviews averaged 20 minutes. When determining data saturation for my research, Malterud et al. (2016) advise that qualitative research, using interview data, apply the criteria of information power as opposed to data saturation. Information power refers to "more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower amount of participants is needed" (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1753). My research had sufficient information power for a small sample size based on Malterud et al.'s (2016) continuum:

- research purpose was relatively narrow, *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?*;
- although the sample was not specific as ECTs were purposefully sampled based on inclusion criteria, they differed in their journeys in to the profession, their motivations, their teaching experiences, prior familiarity with rural contexts, their lifestyles and personalities, and where they were living/teaching in rural Australia (Guest et al., 2006);
- my research was synthesising existing knowledge to ground my conclusions and contributing new knowledge to ECT and RRR education research;
- the quality of the interview data was detailed and sound and can contribute to existing knowledge; similar interview questions asked to all ECTs aids saturation (Guest et al., 2006);
- data analysis was longitudinal and in-depth using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to describe and understand the storied experiences of the ECTs. Braun and Clarke (2021b) suggest information power as an appropriate alternative to data saturation, especially for using thematic analysis.

Guest et al. (2006) and Hennink and Kaiser (2022) recommend that twelve interviews is sufficient for saturation when the research question focuses on understanding the perceptions and experience of comparatively homogeneous individuals. After reading the interview transcripts, and due to the time and word-count constraints of the Doctor of Education thesis, I decided that 12 interviews (six ECTs interviewed on two occasions) provided sufficient rich detailed data that answered my research question; no new insights or themes would come from any further interviews or additional participants (Creswell, 2014).

Participants. Purposeful sampling involves choosing information-rich participants who can offer insight, in-depth understanding, and illuminate the research question (Patton, 2014). As my research aimed to describe and understand the RRR living and working experiences from the ECTs' perspectives, I needed a sample who would enrich the knowledge and enhance awareness of this context (Merriam, 2002). For qualitative research, there are no specific rules for sample size (Patton, 2002), with such research often using smaller purposeful sample sizes due to the specific research focus and the thick and rich descriptive data gathered (Braun & Clarke, 2022; McCulliss, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2005).

Although my purposeful sample appeared homogenous (ECTs who are currently living and working/teaching in RRR Australia), I desired heterogeneity with a diversity of perspectives (e.g. different RRR locations, ages, backgrounds, motivations). I created an inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (as detailed in Limitations and Delimitations). To answer my research question, I needed to source ECTs who were willing and able to describe their experiences of living and working in RRR Australia and gather enough data to convey the ECTs' rich and authentic story (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Participants were sourced from social media; I created the 'Graduate Teachers' Flourishing' profile so I could join Australian educator groups to recruit participants. I searched approximately 30 Australian educator groups (e.g. 'Teachers in Remote Communities', 'Australian Remote Community Educators', 'NT Rural and Remote Teachers', 'Rural, Remote and Regional Teaching' etc.) and asked the administrators permission to post my research recruitment on their group's social media page. The social media post briefly stated the purpose of the research, ethics approval number, and invited individuals to click a link to access and read the introductory letter and information sheet for my research (see Appendix 2 and 3). If any individuals wished to volunteer to be interviewed and believed they met the inclusion criteria, they were asked to provide their name and contact details.

Of the 72 individuals who indicated their interest to be interviewed, 9 returned signed consent forms (as detailed in the Ethics section and Appendix 4) and were emailed asking for convenient times to schedule our interview. Two ECTs were interviewed in Term 1; however, they did not respond to correspondence to schedule a Term 4 interview. As this limitation was not within my control, I decided to exclude their Term 1 data from my findings. Six ECTs formed my purposeful sample as they met the inclusion criteria (see delimitations) and were willing and

available to participate for Term 1 and Term 4 interviews. Each ECT's characteristics and location are shown in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Location of early career teachers in rural, regional, and remote Australia

FLEUR
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
Primary trained
City-born
First career
2 years of teaching
With family

CHARLIE
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
Secondary trained
City-born
First career
1.5 years of teaching
Solo

AVA
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
Primary trained
City-born
First career
2 years of teaching
With partner

EDWARD
NEW SOUTH WALES
Secondary trained
Country-born
Career changer
2 years of teaching
With family

BRIDGET
NEW SOUTH WALES
Secondary trained
City-born
Career changer
1.5 years of teaching
With partner

DAISY
VICTORIA
Primary trained
Country-born
Career changer
3 years of teaching
With partner

3.4 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) developed thematic analysis (TA) as a flexible, accessible, and straightforward method of qualitative data analysis, defining the theory, application, phases, and evaluation of the process. TA generates patterns of meaning to create a rich, detailed, complex story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crowe et al., 2015).

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), a rigorous systematic approach to TA, emphasises a researcher's reflexive, thorough, and thoughtful engagement throughout the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2014, 2019; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). It acknowledges the researcher's active role in creating knowledge and shaping the analysis (Byrne, 2022) and the interaction between the researcher, the data, and the research context (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). To do justice to this approach, I was conscious of my own perspectives, biases, assumptions, and experiences, and considered how these factors may shape the analysis (Creswell, 2013; Joffe, 2011; Peel, 2020).

My decision to use RTA was due to its connection with my research paradigms, my methodology, and my methods. RTA was used to code and develop themes from the qualitative interview data, uncovering the ECTs' personal and contextual systems, their interactions across time, and their interpretations and experiences of working and living in RRR Australia. As I interpreted and generated detailed descriptions and patterns of meaning that ECTs' attributed to their RRR experiences, I was mindful that the ECTs' own words were reflected and honoured in my interpretations (Byrne, 2022; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

Braun and Clarke emphasise that RTA is a recursive guided process of data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). RTA is "an invitation, a springboard; it's something to help you on your journey…plot your own route" (Braun et al., 2022, p. 431). The six phases of RTA and my engagement in each phase are shown in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Reflexive Thematic Analysis phases
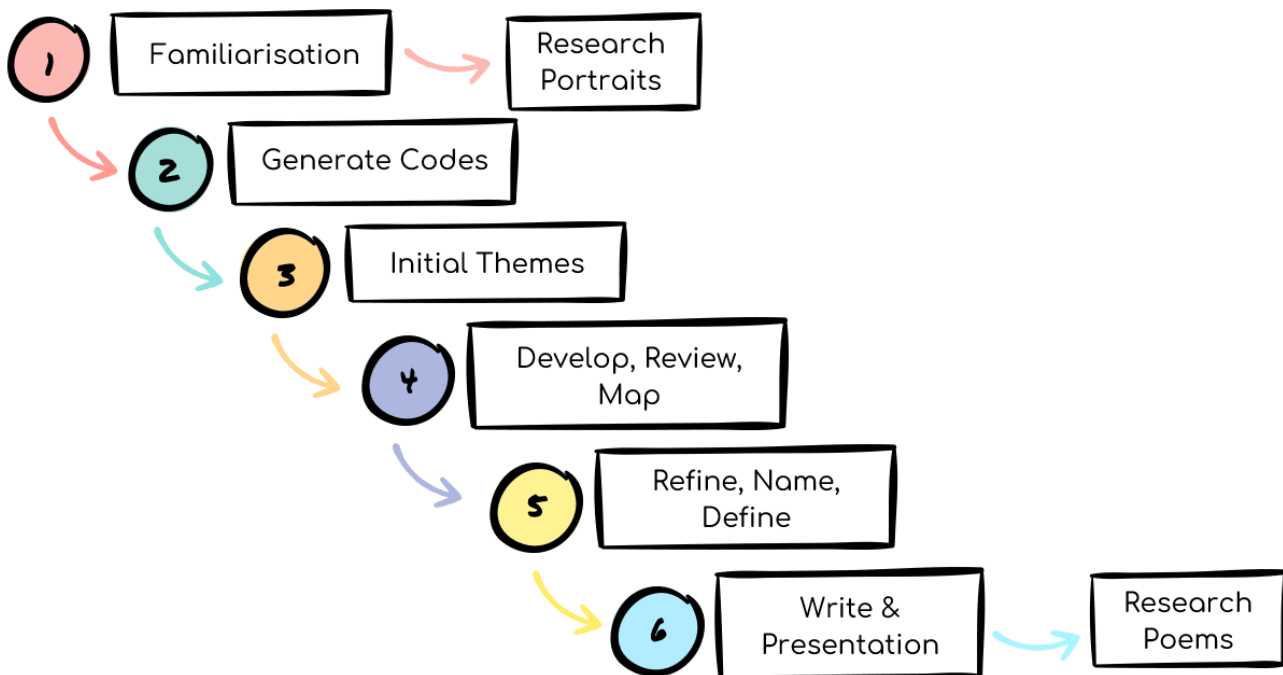
3.4.1 Familiarisation

From conducting the interviews, to listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts to check the accuracy of the transcription, I was actively familiarising myself with the data before engaging in the analysis (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

For RTA, I approached the interview data with fresh eyes and perspective to immerse myself in the data once more and gain an in-depth understanding of its content. While reading the individual transcripts, and the entire dataset, I noticed the nuances of ECTs' narratives and their framing of experiences; I penned my initial thoughts and reactions, ideas, and personal connections to their responses in my notebook (see Figure 8). While reflecting and notetaking before I began coding, I noticed there was a larger story in the data, comprising of smaller stories, events, interactions, and experiences (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022). I decided to craft a research portrait for each ECT that captured their personal story and their experiences of RRR work and life, yet subtly weaved the nuanced themes within each story (case analysis).

Figure 8: Initial thoughts during familiarisation

Ava

Strong support systems in professional and personal life

Motivation
friend's sister suggested applying as they're open to graduate applications

Felt appreciated at interview - full time teaching straight out of uni

Felt daunted at first and less than 4 hours from home

Wasn't considering country teaching, no connections no pracs, partner keen to move

Leadership
Highly regarded, involved, helpful

Continuous support through challenging moments

Principal saw her worth in interview, felt wanted and appreciated, faith in her

Reinforced by telling Ava she is sets a good example, paving the way and being a true leader of the early career teachers at my site

Hierarchy of leadership but approachable

Connection not as strong as deputy due to "added responsibility"

Deputy has mum quality, nurturing, available, approachable, checks in and "gets it" reads emotions

School factors
Middle primary – trained in it

Fortunate staying in same school

School culture – there for staff and students, great place to work, connection and fluidity for roles (fundraising and fair)

Opportunities to make most of the experience – gives her appearance to stand out for employer

Mentor system, everyone has a mentor at the school

Colleagues
Colleagues for debriefing – not alone in how she feels "it's not just me"

Friday debrief – share wins and proud moments, sharing struggles, moments of exhaustion and darkest moments" Love sharing experiences

Talking to colleagues who are teacher's who get it

Connections, build relationships with staff

Not singled out, all on par just less experienced

Supported another early career teacher, he asks questions from someone who's been in same boat

Chatting and talking with colleagues supports wellbeing

Mentor
relatable, collaborative, supportive in planning and questions and bounce ideas

Students
Pride in strong relationship with students – Time and effort rewarding

Relationship meant more than curriculum

Support them supports her

Happy when student remember and use what they've learned, when strugglers grow – feels made a difference, little moments of triumph and wins

Values these connections

Build students belief in themselves

Heart full of love to give them, number one priority

Partner
Happy to move to regional – big support

Supportive and understanding that teaching is a commitment and obligations with work

Family - mum
Debriefing and reassurance from mum/teachers, weight off shoulders, different perspective, advice

Visits every couple weeks, connection keeps her sane

Community
Welcoming, happy she and partner were there

Positive wellbeing creating community connections, sense of belonging, feel like a local

Knows the goings on in the town

Try to have friends outside of work

Know the families of students better insight into child's behaviour and learning

Individual
Handle on curriculum and resources – reassuring and confident, know what and how to teach it

Positive self-talk "I'm okay. I can do this. I can figure this out. I can wing it if I need to. I know what I'm doing a lot more than I did."

Makes time to be home, for friends and family

Not wearing a mask as a teacher

Sees worth in work

Pride and reward in full time teaching

Persevered, made mistakes, not perfect but refined and improved

Proud of her reflective teaching practice and downfalls

Believes she gives students quality education

Research portraits.

I see you, as you want to be seen
I hear you, as you want to be heard
I speak you, as you tell me what to say
I write you, as you give me the words
Through your eyes, your words, your voice. (Dixson et al., 2005, p. 23)

Qualitative research offered me the opportunity to express my findings in a flexible, literary text that was not constrained to formal academic structures for conveying research findings (Creswell, 2007). I wished to tell a compelling story of the ECTs' experiences through their eyes, words, and voice, rather than the traditional approach of using participant quotes to support the researcher's arguments and interpretations (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022).

But are stories regarded as science?

The best stories are those which stir people's minds, hearts, and souls and by so doing give them new insights into themselves, their problems, and their human condition. The challenge is to develop a human science that can more fully serve this aim…but "Can science learn to tell good stories? (Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 50)

Portraits, as a method of qualitative social science inquiry, balances empirical *science* (communicating the knowledge) with *art* (communicating the composed creative response) to illuminate the voices of individuals in their lived worlds (Cacciattolo & Gilmore, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). Rather than choosing science or art, researchers will "see more deeply through two lenses" (Richardson, 2001, p. 11). Narrative stories are universal and exist everyday as "a mode of reasoning and a mode of representation" (Richardson, 1990, p. 118) to express, describe, and understand the lived human experience. Research portraits offered a "reflective glass" to enhance and enrich our understanding and improve practice for ECTs and their RRR educational settings (Hackmann, 2002).

To answer my research question, research portraits 'painted' the stories of the ECTs' experiences in their RRR contexts. "Drawing is drawing out" (Dewey & Kaplan, 2008, p. 98); ECTs' portraits authentically honoured and humanised their voices and life world experiences, capturing the essence of "the beautiful/ugly experiences" (p. 9) and "the raw hurt and the pleasure" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 10) of working and living in RRR Australia that will resonate with broad audiences (Anderson, 2011; Brooks, 2017; Cope et al., 2015).

Portraits linked with my research paradigms and theoretical framework as they capture and communicate the voices of ECTs navigating and interpreting their contextual systems of influence, and the intricacies and nuances of human experiences, social interactions, and organisational life (Creswell, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). My research portraits were my interpretive rendering of the ECTs' rich meaningful experiences (Davis, 2003; Galletta & Cross, 2013). Portraits are outsider-in writing. The outsider/researcher brings to life the insiders/ECTs' world through the 'drawn' worded world (Cope et al., 2015; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Education research has applied portraiture to give voice and highlight the stories and experiences of PSTs (Cacciattolo & Gilmore, 2016; Moore, 2011; Newton, 2005), beginning/novice teachers (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Muccio et al., 2015), experienced teachers (Anderson, 2011; Chapman, 2005, 2007; Hill, 2005; Quigley et al., 2015; Smitka, 2015), and academics (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2011).

The decision to use research portraits as a writing framework to re-present and re-interpret my interview data (Anderson, 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) was informed by Galletta and Cross (2013) who ask the researcher, if writing for clarity and impact, what is the story I wish to tell and how will I do justice to the story?

The story I wished to tell was the teachers' stories, illustrating: Where did they go? Why did they go? Who did they encounter? What events happened? What was of influence on their work and life in the RRR area?

Teachers tell stories. Portraits tell *their* stories.

The portraits were not my, the researcher's, story.

To do their story justice, I transformed the ECTs' experiences into portraits - to hear *their* voices, tell *their* story, in *their* words, and paint the canvas and fill the frame with *their* contextual experiences (Cope et al., 2015; Featherstone, 1989). The emerging representation from the narrative portraits will depict a likeness, a resemblance, the essence of these ECTs' experiences. The six portraits formed a collective biography; their narratives illustrated valid, broad truths and complex meanings of ECTs' experiences – real individuals in real contexts (Cope et al., 2015; Featherstone, 1989).

Richardson (1994) asked how a researcher might craft a text that was important, attended to, and mattered to the audience. My intended audience for my thesis includes future teachers, ECTs, experienced teachers, RRR teachers, the RRR communities, other professionals who live and work in RRR Australia, school leaders, individuals in government and universities involved in education, different school sectors, and especially, the six ECT participants from this research. I wanted each research portrait to speak to both the head and the heart of the audience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

I was guided by the processes undertaken by Rodríguez-Dorans (2022) and Seidman (2019) for crafting the research portraits from the first-person perspective using the interview transcripts. The six phases of crafting the research portraits are shown in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9: Process for crafting research portraits
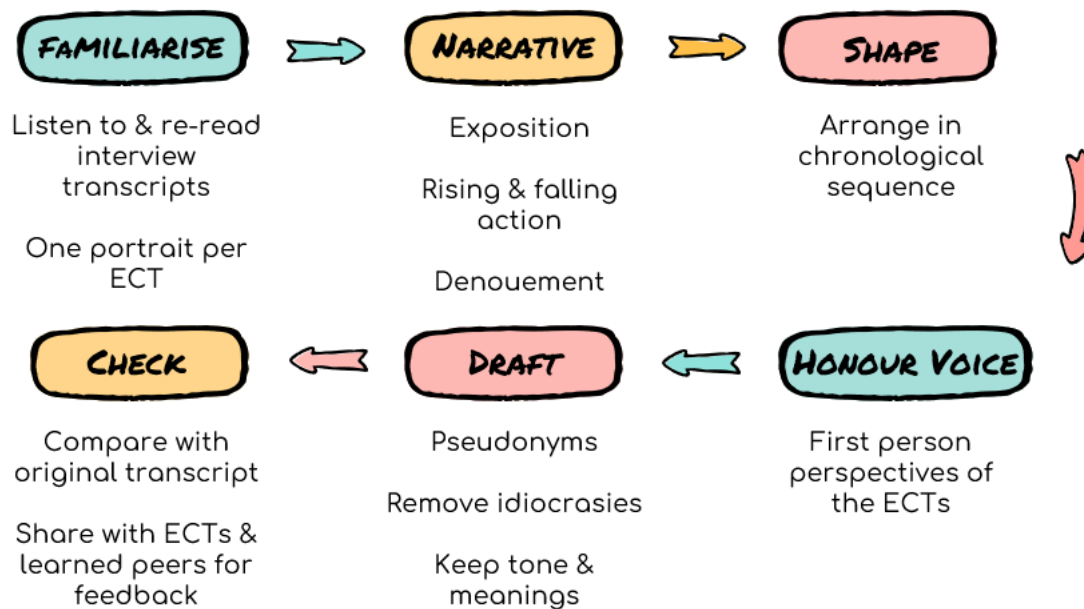
To familiarise myself with the data (Taylor et al., 2015), I listened to the 12 audio recordings and read/re-read the 12 interview transcripts. I inductively listened and read, noting passages of importance and interest to my research area. My judgement was shaped by my making meaning, interpretations, and background experiences, as well as "the gut feeling and literary hunches of the researcher" (Poindexter, 2002, p. 708) therefore it is difficult to replicate (Seidman, 2019).

The experiences and events scattered throughout the interview can help construct a narrative (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Reflecting on the passages of importance and interest, I

noticed threads of comparison that suited a narrative arc that shapes and structures a story. An oversimplified structure of a narrative arc follows the exposition, the rising and falling actions, and ends with the denouement, including "the 'whats', 'whys' and/or the 'hows' of experience" (Owton, 2017, p. 45). As an English teacher familiar with narratives, I felt confident in using the narrative arc to structure the ECTs' stories of their experiences.

For each ECT's two transcripts (Term 1 and Term 4), I highlighted and labelled the important and interesting text ready for arranging and sequencing on a copy of the interview transcripts, the original transcript remained untouched for referencing accuracy (Seidman, 2019). The labels were:

↓ *Exposition* – this introduction and orientation of the ECTs' contexts provided the audiences with details to understand where and when their RRR experiences occurred. Information included their background, journey into the teaching profession, and motivations and first impressions of working and living in RRR areas (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022);

↓ *Rising action and falling action* – the changes, challenges, and obstacles faced by the ECTs, their actions to navigate the situation, and the resolution and consequences in their lives and their stories were varied (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022). Different ECTs with different contexts constructed different meanings to their social experiences (Saunders et al., 2019). Sections were highlighted and labelled as Start of Year, Mid-Year, and End of Year;

↓ *Characters* - the characters who were present in the ECTs' transcripts/stories were: partners, friends, family, community, leaders, colleagues, students, parents. In my research portrait's first person account, the ECTs were the protagonists of their world, the characters had active or passive roles in their lives (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022);

↓ *Denouement* – the narrative arc ends with the denouement; how the events and experiences have influenced the ECTs' future intentions to work and live in RRR areas. Also included was their recommendations and insights they could offer in hindsight (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022).

I arranged the highlighted, labelled text into the narrative arc sequence and chronology of events; the characters were interspersed throughout the story, wherever they were mentioned by the ECT. For flow, readability, and maintaining chronology (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022), labelled passages were copied and pasted into a word document (one for each ECT) under the headings (Seidman, 2019):

↓ Exposition – ECT's backgrounds, journey, motivations, and RRR first impressions;
↓ Rising Action & Falling Action 1 – Start of the year (Term 1);

- ↓ Rising Action & Falling Action 2 – Middle and end of the year (Term 4);
- ↓ Denouement 1 – Moving forward, future intentions and decisions;
- ↓ Denouement 2 – Recommendations, insights, and advice to other ECTs or experienced teachers considering RRR work and life.

An example of an interview transcript (left) transformed into a research portrait (right) is shown in Figure 10 below.

Figure 10: Example of an interview transcript (left) transformed into a research portrait (right)

The decision to write the research portraits from the first-person perspective of the ECTs was influenced by Galletta and Cross's (2013) advice about whose story I wished to tell, but also who owned the story? Using first-person perspective aimed to craft a more powerful narrative with the voices of the ECTs (Seidman, 2019). The ECTs were the experts in their own life world (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022). The rich expressive first-person portraits honoured the voices of the ECTs with their own words, the voice, from their interviews (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022; Seidman, 2019).

Drafting was an iterative process to preserve, not change, the ECTs' meaning and context. I purposefully arranged the passages, weaved ideas, reflected on and appraised the narrative structure and flow, to shape a coherent research portrait (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Seidman, 2019;

Taylor et al., 2015). I endeavoured to remain true to the ECTs' words, without altering the tone or meanings, however, for readability, I deleted the characteristics and idiocrasies of verbal speech that don't feature in written text, e.g. "umm, yeah, like, so, really, but, you know." These exclusions were necessary for coherence, and semantic analysis was not required for this research. (Poindexter, 1998; Taylor et al., 2015). For example, the original transcript stated "I actually wasn't considering moving out country at all. My family is solely based metropolitan or interstate or overseas. So I really didn't have any connections out country so I didn't do any pracs or I didn't do any kind of experience out country." Deletions created this refined version "I wasn't considering moving out country at all. My family is metropolitan based. I didn't have any connections out country; I didn't do any pracs or any kind of experience out country."

As detailed in the Ethics section, suitable pseudonyms were used to keep all names anonymous by concealing any identifying details without misrepresenting (Seidman, 2019). Maintaining the ECTs' dignity and self-worth was paramount, I did not wish to mock them through the portrait representation (Seidman, 2019). ECTs were emailed their research portrait for member checking, to gain their perspective, and establish the portrait's accuracy. Two ECTs responded via email:

> …all looks great! Thank you for including me in your research. (Bridget, personal communication, June 16, 2023)

> Thanks for the opportunity to review the narrative you have drafted - it was a great chance to revisit some of my thinking from 2019. The narrative was accurate and is an effective communication tool. (Edward, personal communication, April 29, 2023)

With the research portraits crafted, I returned to my original interview transcripts and continued with the phases of RTA.

3.4.2 Generate codes

A code is a label for a section of data (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Using an inductive 'bottom-up' approach, I began with semantic coding; the descriptive, explicit, surface-level phrases and sentences that stem from the ECTs' understandings of their experience. I identified, highlighted, and labelled meaningful passages that were of interest and/or related to my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As this process progressed, latent coding was applied; the conceptual, implicit, underlying assumptions that shape and inform the semantic codes. I theorised the meaning of the codes and patterns, making connections to the research literature. The entire dataset was coded and the process repeated; I coded for multiple possible themes, coded with contextual examples from the interviews, and coded examples that could cover one or more different themes; all collated on a word document for the next stage of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As I coded, I was mindful of my own subjectivity, interpretations, and assumptions that could shape my coding and theme analysis; although the theoretical framework guided my research, it was important to allow the data to speak for itself without influence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I was reflexive by noting my own interpretations and experience as I deepened my understanding of the data, capturing codes with which I connected. RTA hasn't any expectations that codes and/or themes could be replicated as accuracy and reliability of coding may vary with different research interpretations of the data (Byrne, 2022).

3.4.3 Initial themes

RTA themes are "rich, multifaceted patterns of shared meaning situated around a central organizing concept" (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p. 50). Generating themes was an inductive iterative process in which I examined the collated codes and organised and grouped them into shared meaningful patterns (themes) across the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I actively worked back and forth with the codes and the data, clustered similar codes, important codes were promoted to an overarching theme, developed connections using my notes and sketching ideas, and reflected on the viability of each potential theme (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). I was conscious of my role as the researcher in crafting the initial themes; I ensured my analysis was data-driven (not influenced by my theoretical framework) and linked to my research question by returning to the interview data to corroborate themes.

Although the ECTs had different journeys to, and experiences of, RRR working and living, and revealed unique, personal, and contextual stories, there was heterogeneity in their experiences across the dataset, yet I was mindful to consider the ECTs' alternate perspectives that deviated from the shared experiences. I established an extensive 'catalogue' of overarching themes and levels of themes, linking contextual examples from the ECTs' interviews, to assist in the following processes of developing, reviewing, refining, defining, and naming themes. The screenshot below (Figure 11) shows the crafting of initial themes using the ECTs' interview data.

Figure 11: Example of initial themes

3.4.4 Develop, review, and map

Once initial themes were constructed, I reviewed the coded examples of each theme, ensuring each theme captured the essence of the coded data. Constructing thematic maps helped clarify my thinking by visualising the connections and relationships between and within the initial themes and codes (cross-case and case analysis respectively), and the levels of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Thematic maps must accurately represent and "reflect the meanings evident in the data set as a whole" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). As the development and review of themes was an iterative and recursive process with the data, these maps were modified as my understanding of the data, codes, and themes progressed. An example of the initial mapping the overarching themes and sub-themes, framed by the bioecological theory, is shown in Figure 12 below; this was reviewed and modified.

Figure 12: Initial mapping of the overarching themes and sub-themes.
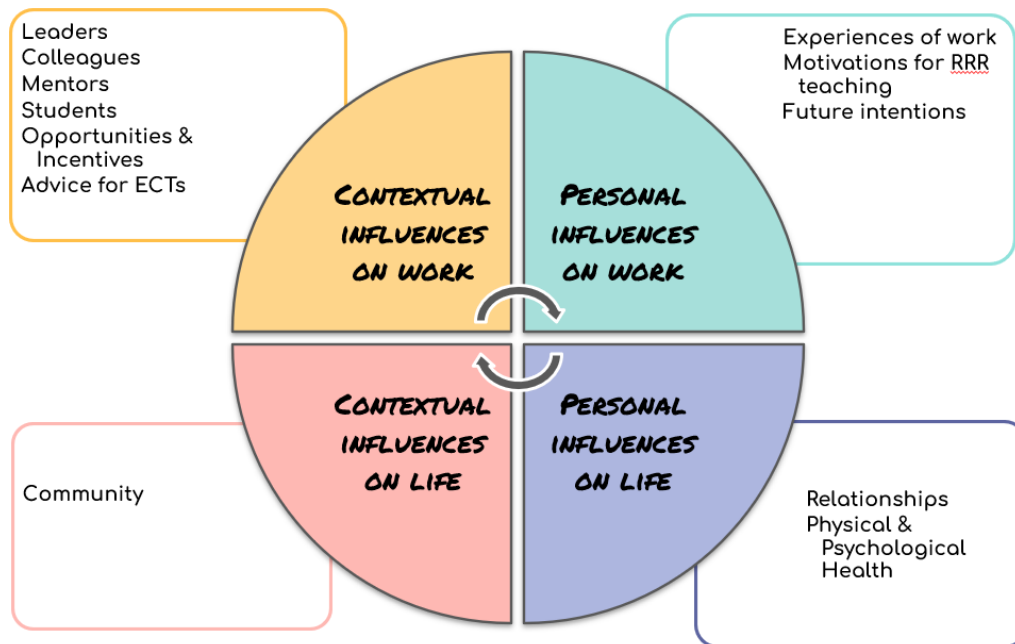
3.4.5 Refine, name, and define

Refinement decisions involved asking myself whether the codes, themes, maps helped answer my research question (Terry & Hayfield, 2021) *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?* This clarified the connections and distinctions of themes, and how codes fit into sub-themes.

To define the themes, I described and constructed a detailed explanation for each theme, supported by relevant examples from the data. The definition of themes must capture the essence of a coherent comprehensive story about the patterns of shared meaning of a concept across the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021a, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

In naming themes, draft labels were replaced with clear descriptive names that were concise and encapsulated the theme. To remain connected with the data, and not use 'bucket' topic summaries as theme names, I mostly chose words and phrases from the ECTs that also reflected the theme's content (Braun et al., 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest developing two to six themes that are rich, complex, and distinct and tell the best possible story of the data.

As RTA themes are actively developed by the researcher, I acknowledge my subjectivity in crafting theme names and definitions; my background, my experiences as a teacher, my prior knowledge, my social constructivism and interpretivism research paradigm, and research literature may have unconsciously guided my interpretations and decisions (Braun et al., 2022).

Framed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), Figure 13 shows the ECT is centred as the 'person', nested within their immediate and distal contextual systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem). The factors that influenced their interactions (process) and experiences of working and living in RRR Australia over the course of a year (time) are within each contextual system. This will be explored in Chapter 6's Discussion.

Figure 13: Factors that influence the work and life of early career teachers in rural, regional, and remote Australia.
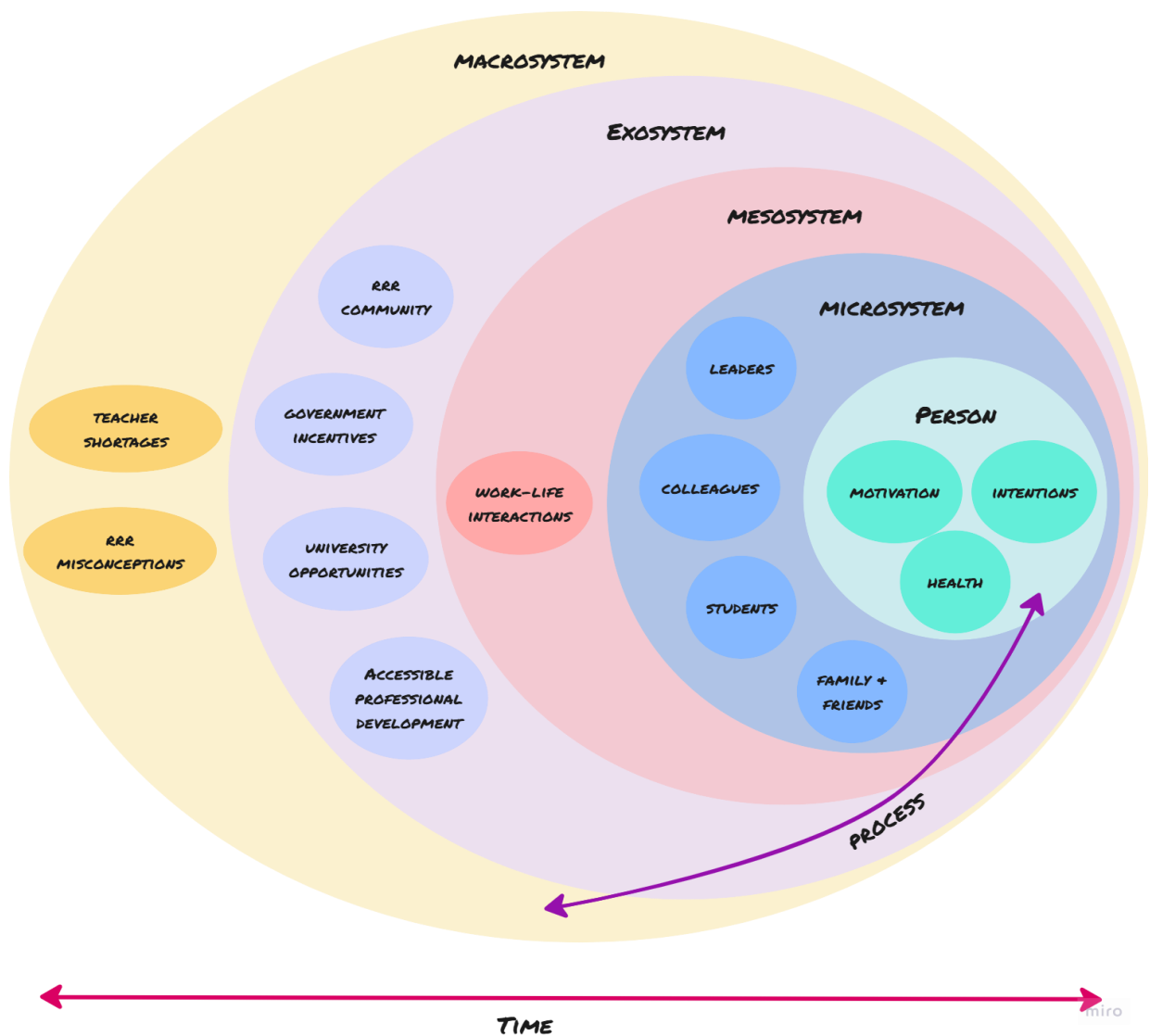
3.4.6 Write and presentation

The final phase of RTA is weaving a narrative with examples linked to exiting research literature (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Research portraits illustrated the evolving themes within each ECT's experiences (case analysis); research poems illustrated the holistic themes across all ECTs' experiences of work and life in RRR areas (cross-case analysis). The research portraits and research poems are presented in the two findings chapters; this approach was chosen as a forum to discuss the meaning making analyses in these texts, which aligns with social constructivism and interpretivism versions of RTA (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Research poems, crafted from the themes of RTA, have been used by Furman in research focusing on social work, adolescent identity and development, and gerontology, as well as demonstrating how to use thematic analysis and research poetry in qualitative research (Furman et al., 2006, 2007, 2010; Furman & Dill, 2015; Langer & Furman, 2004).

Research poems.

Poetry informs when, as writer or reader, you enter a space of intuitive imagination and disappear into another's words. (Glesne, 2010, p. 36)

Similarly to research portraits, research poems are a form of art-based qualitative research representation, unrestricted by traditional research writing (Faulkner, 2009; Percer, 2015). Crafted with the participant's exact words from the interview data, research poems condense their words to convey the key messages from the research findings, without reference to the researcher (Faulkner, 2009; Langer & Furman, 2004; McCulliss, 2013). Research poems are feeling pictures (Leavy, 2009) of a felt experience (Camic et al., 2022) that "whisk us along a journey that compels, demands, and persuades" (Ely, 1997, p. 135) "a space of intuitive imagination and disappear into another's words" (Glesne, 2010, p. 36).

Linked with my social constructivism and interpretivism paradigms, research poems were my interpretive rendering of the themes generated from the interview data. I endeavoured to capture and honour the ECTs' living voice and human face (Featherstone, 1989; Percer, 2015) and communicate the essence of their understanding of their social, contextual lived experiences (Leavy, 2009; McCulliss, 2013; Richardson, 2001). Crafted with the ECTs' words, the themed research poems combined and compressed their stories to intensify their voice, to create vivid moments "as if under a magnifying glass" (Leavy, 2009, p. 63), and to communicate and evoke multiple meanings (Grbich, 2013; McCulliss, 2013; Poindexter, 1998).

Research poems were suitable in presenting the answer to my research question; each themed poem offered "a window into the heart of human experience" (McCulliss, 2013, p. 83) and illustrated the different perceptions, understandings, and encounters that influences the ECTs work and life in RRR areas. As Taylor et al. (2015) noted "All perspectives are worthy of study" (p. 9).

In addition to honouring and highlighting the voices of the ECTs, I chose research poems for the audience to connect with the research themes in an impactful, comprehensive yet accessible way (Furman et al., 2006; Humble & Radina, 2019; Leavy, 2009). They aimed to evoke emotional and cognitive responses in the audience, inviting them closer to the data, as they interpret, connect with, and reflect on the ECTs' context and experiences (Faulkner, 2009; McCulliss, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Richardson transformed interviews into poems to communicate the truths of participants' lived experiences and recreate empathetic moments (Richardson, 1997, 2001). Poindexter (1998, 2002) turned interviews into poems as a powerful tool to evoke empathy and understanding in honouring participants' words and worlds. Others have used poems to emotionally connect the audience with a shared experience (Carr, 2003), inviting them in to the participant's context and lives (Faulkner, 2005). In education research, Sparkes et al. (2003) presented teachers' experiences in physical education as poems, and Wood and Sikes (2022) transformed an interview in to a poem to "evoke and encapsulate the general feeling" (p. 103) of a teachers' experience during an Ofsted inspection.

I chose to combine all 6 ECTs' voices within the theme, displaying all perspectives, being mindful not to present just one perspective of living and working in RRR Australia. Glesne (2010, p. 36) assures that there isn't a correct method of transforming transcripts in to poems. I combined the steps applied by Grbich (2013), Humble and Radina (2019), Owton (2017), and Poindexter (1998, 2002) in rendering interview transcripts in to poems. The six phases of crafting the research poems are shown in Figure 14 below.

Figure 14: Process for crafting research poems
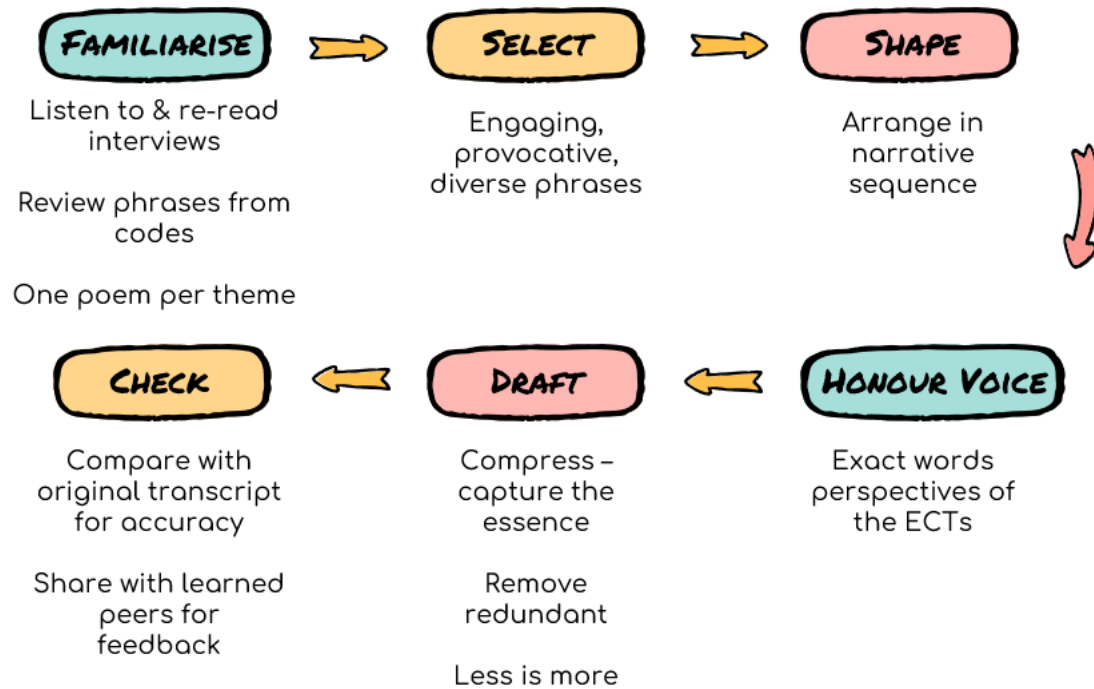
Across all of the examples that supported each theme, I selected the phrases that were engaging, provocative, and highlighted the diverse perspectives of the ECTs' experiences (Faulkner, 2005b; Humble & Radina, 2019). Similarly to research portraits, the selecting, arranging, and sequencing process involves "the gut feeling and literary hunches of the researcher" (Poindexter, 2002, p. 708). Crafting the research poem by carefully arranging and sequencing the phrases required time, practise, and reflexivity. Each word was purposely and thoughtfully chosen; I rearranged, added, removed, revised, assessed to ensure that the theme's narrative story flowed, it captured the essence of all six ECTs' voices and experiences, and aimed to evoke emotions and resonated with the audience (Humble & Radina, 2019; Poindexter, 1998). An example of the ECTs' themed phrases (left) transformed into a research poem (right) is shown in Figure 15 below.

Figure 15: Example of themed phrases from early career teachers (left) transformed into a research poem (right)
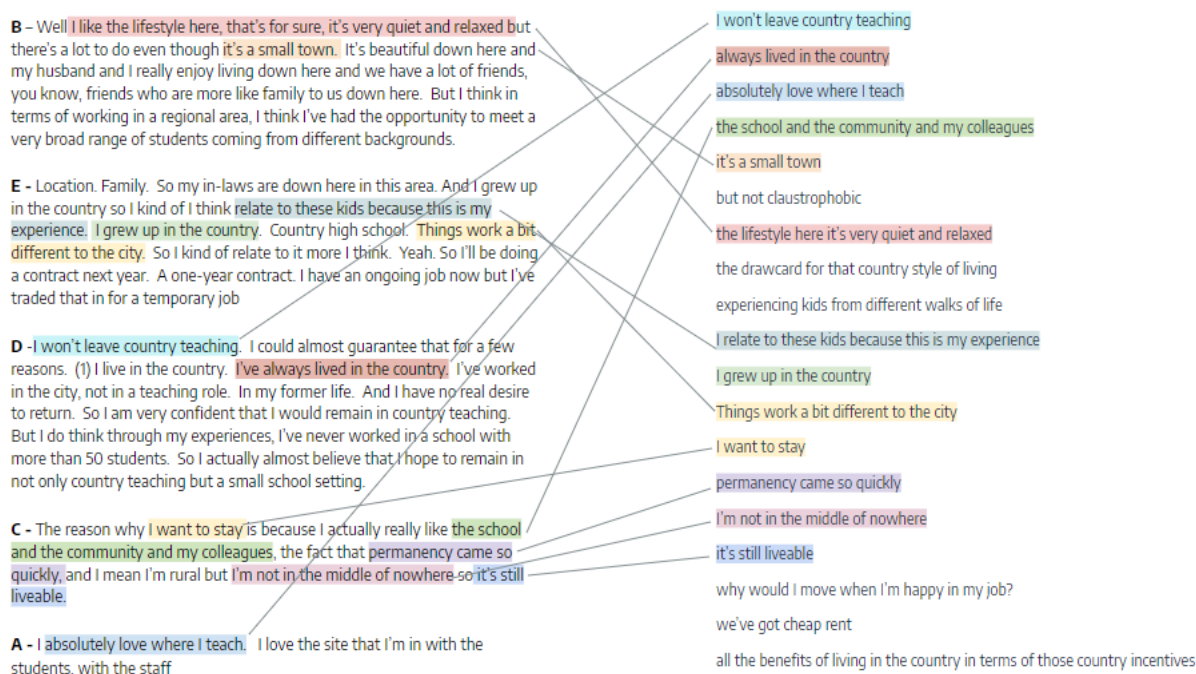
The strength of research poems is their authenticity by using the participants exact words and intentions from the interview data (Glesne, 2010). I preserved the phrases of the ECTs to honour their voices, but some words or phrases were removed if I felt they were redundant to the meaning of the poem. In the Figure 14 example, Bridget stated "I like the lifestyle here, that's for sure, it's very quiet and relaxed", I removed "that's for sure" from the poem as it did not contribute to the story, the experience, the theme, nor helped answer the research question. Less is more in poetry, therefore compression allows the audience to focus on the essence of the ECTs experiences in a condensed in-depth text (Langer & Furman, 2004).

Free verse poems (Prendergast, 2009) were used as they are not constrained by rhyme or pattern and mimics ordinary English speech. Line breaks were used for pauses while reading. Repetition of words or phrases reflect those voiced by ECTs and were included for emphasis. Any grammatical inconsistencies or inarticulateness were direct from the ECTs' interview data (Glesne, 2010).

I shared my research poems with my research group, my supervisors, and at a research conference for peer debriefing and feedback. Responses were of curiosity as research poems

were an accessible approach to understanding the qualitative findings while also honouring the ECTs' voices and engaging the interest of the audience (Grbich, 2013; Humble & Radina, 2019).

3.5 Ethics

My research was approved on the 7th January 2019 by The Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee #8240 (see Appendix 1). At all times, the dignity, rights, and psychological welfare of my participants was at the forefront; all benefits were balanced against potential risks (Flick, 2009).

All participants who chose to volunteer for interviews in Term 1 and Term 4 were emailed a letter of introduction (introducing myself and outlining my research), an information sheet (describing the research purpose, participant expectations and benefits, ethical considerations, and next steps), and a consent form. Only RRR ECTs who returned their signed consent forms via email were included in my research. Those who chose to be interviewed in Term 1 but did not respond when emailed to schedule the Term 4 interview were excluded from the data corpus. No participants were coerced or provided financial incentive to participate in my research.

All interview questions were worded and checked by my supervisors, ensuring that any psychological harm or discomfort was minimised. Counselling services were provided on the information sheet. It was assumed that their responses were open and truthful as confidentiality and anonymity were assured, giving them the time and space to talk freely without consequences. Fortunately, no participants expressed any distress by their involvement in the research and as noted earlier several responded positively to the opportunity to share their stories.

All interview recordings were deidentified and transcribed by a professional transcription company. Upon receiving the transcripts, I listened to the recording and double-checked the accuracy of the transcription. Pseudonyms were used in the research portraits and research poems to deidentify the ECTs, locations, schools, universities, professional bodies/organisations, and individuals mentioned in the transcripts. Interview transcripts, data analysis, and data representation were reported with accuracy and neutrality. By using the ECTs' words and phrases in the formation of the research portraits and research poems, I aimed to represent their experiences as authentically and accurately as possible and trust they would not find their portrayal as embarrassing or inaccurate compared to other ECTs' research portraits and the data poems.

All documentation associated with my thesis was deidentified to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and stored in a safe, secure cloud-based system with restricted access and password protection.

3.6 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, encompassing the overall credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the research, assess the rigour of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Experienced educators, who are researchers, can find distinguishing between the two challenging with regards to their experiences (Peel, 2020). To reflect, acknowledge and "know the self within the process of research itself" (Creswell, 2013, p. 183), the following section is an overview of the strategies I have implemented (discussed throughout my methodology chapter) to support the trustworthiness and confidence in my research practises and findings.

- as the "biographically situated researcher" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11) was involved throughout the research process, I included a positionality statement that acknowledged my background, experiences, and potential assumptions, biases, and perspectives, and how these influenced my choices of research question, research paradigms, methodology, data gathering and analysis methods, and presentation of my findings.
- designed a flexible plan and record of my decisions, alterations, and actions throughout the research process from the research proposal, creating the resources, ethics approval, sourcing the ECTs, data gathering, data analysis, and data representation.
- notetaking audit trail (see Appendix 9) enabled me to pursue leads of inquiry, brainstorm ideas, follow the important and interesting, weigh up options for moving forward, draft and map connections and patterns, and reflect on my thoughts and interpretations during the research process (from the initial planning, to sourcing the ECTs and interviewing them, then RTA and presenting findings as research portraits and research poems).
- explained sourcing and inclusion/exclusion selection criteria for my purposeful sample of ECTs living and working in RRR Australia, who represent both homogenous and divergent perspectives relevant to answering my research question.
- acknowledged in my information sheet and before interviews commenced, I introduced myself, my background as a teacher and my research purpose. This 'common ground' in education may have inadvertently fostered rapport, impacted ECTs' openness in their responses.

- created semi-structured, open-ended interviews that captured multiple perspectives and invited ECTs to share their experiences, generating thick, context-rich, meaningful descriptions (Miles et al., 2020). Pilot testing of the interview guiding questions assisted with reviewing the questions; any changes were noted.

- consistent data gathering through audio recording of interviews, which were transcribed by a professional transcription company. Transcripts were member-checked by the ECTs. I examined the accuracy of the transcript by comparing the verbatim transcript while listening to the audio recording. An interview guide helped to steer the flexible professional conversation during interviews.

- outlined the phases of RTA and how the codes, themes, definitions, and interpretations were bottom-up, well-grounded, and reflected the multiple voices of the ECTs' experiences and perspectives within the data (Gray, 2004).

- presented the research findings (research portraits and research poems), using the ECTs' words and phrases, so that it "rings true, makes sense, seems convincing or plausible", the language, words and phrases are accessible to audiences (Miles et al., 2020, p. 306). Comparable, divergent, and alternative perspectives were included.

- crafted thick, rich descriptions in the research portraits and research poems; this contextual information will allow the audience to understand and discern whether the findings are resonant, relevant, and/or applicable to their own contexts and experiences, and consistent with literature and previous research (Bazeley, 2021; Grbich, 2013; Miles et al., 2020; Noble & Smith, 2015).

- research portraits were member checked by two ECTs. Peer debriefing with my supervisors, HDR group, and conference presentations helped confirm my inferences, sought feedback, invited interpretations, and offered their multiple perspectives on the findings. I noted their feedback, advice, and curiosities, this gave me a well-rounded understanding of my interpretations.

- findings (represented as research portraits and research poems) generated important, worthy knowledge about ECTs' work and life in RRR Australia, aiming to stimulate conversation, encourage understanding, provide insight, and contribute to knowledge in the influences on ECTs' experiences in these areas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Miles et al., 2020; Yardley, 2000).

3.7 Limitations and delimitations

There were limitations to this research; with the guidance from my supervisors throughout the research process, steps were taken to mitigate these shortcomings. Although these issues were anticipated and acknowledged, the following will outline the potential limitations for my research.

As ECTs were invited to volunteer, those who were available and willing to participate were selected. There was an imbalance in gender among participants (two male and four females) although these numbers are reflective of the percentages of full-time male (28.3%) and female (71.7%) teachers in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Despite efforts to recruit RRR ECTs on national and state/territory social media pages, not all Australian states were represented in the findings (Northern Territory, Queensland, and Tasmania were not represented). Australia's unique RRR contexts could generate different responses to ECTs living and working/teaching in these areas, affecting transferability. Future research could explore various Australia's RRR areas and the work and life experiences of ECTs in these locations.

The sample size was small; this was beneficial for the thick and rich descriptive data, and specific purposeful sample (ECTs, contract or permanent, part or full time, currently employed in RRR areas in Australia), required to answer my research question.

Interview data were gathered at two time points (end of Term 1 and end of Term 4). Of the 8 ECTs interviewed in Term 1, two ECTs not respond to correspondence to schedule a Term 4 interview; this was not within my control. Their Term 1 data were omitted from my findings as I wished to explore the living and teaching experiences between the two time points. However, changes in ECTs' work and life experiences, such as year levels or subjects taught, teaching load, employment status, personal circumstances etc. could not be controlled.

The ECTs were interviewed in 2019. Research findings reflected the understandings, experiences, and interpretations of ECTs' work and life in RRR areas prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. ECTs referred to past and/or current schools, universities, and government policies and structures that may or may not exist in 2023 but will require further exploration.

Delimitations were applied to define the scope and ensure that my research was focused, manageable, and achievable in the Doctor of Education thesis timeframe. To answer my research

question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?*, inclusion criteria for the purposeful sample were:

- ECTs (in their first 3 years of professional teaching experience);
- living in a RRR area (encompasses all areas outside Australia's major cities) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021);
- teaching in a RRR school, including any teaching appointment (one term, semester, or year appointment), any teaching specialisation (early childhood, primary, or secondary), in any teaching fraction (part-time or full-time), in any form of employment (casual, contract, permanent).

Exclusion criteria were experienced teachers (more than 5 years of professional teaching experience), those working/teaching and living in major cities, and unemployed or retired teachers; these characteristics were not central to my research question. These delimitations helped define the scope of my research and answer my research question in a focused, manageable, and achievable manner.

Summary. This chapter outlined and justified the research methodology and methods employed to answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?* Framed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and guided by social constructivism and interpretivism paradigms, a longitudinal qualitative research design afforded the rich detailed exploration of six early career teachers' experiences and interactions in their RRR contexts. From the semi-structured interviews gathered in Terms 1 and 4 of a school year, themes were generated from RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and analysed across the layers of the bioecological theoretical framework.

The research findings will be presented in the following two chapters. Chapter 4's Findings are research portraits that share the stories of the six ECTs, subtly illustrating the factors *within each* ECT (cross analysis) that influenced their work and life in RRR areas. Chapter 5's Findings are research poems which draw on all ECTs voices; each poem encompassing the essence of and illuminating the research themes.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS – PORTRAITS

Chapter 3's Methodology and Methods outlined and justified the longitudinal qualitative research methods to help answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?* RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) generated themes from the six ECTs' interviews, and were analysed across the layers of the bioecological theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The following is the first of two Findings chapters. Research portraits re-present and re-interpret the findings from the semi-structured interview data gathered in Terms 1 and 4.

These portraits share the ECTs' experiences, tell *their* story, in *their* words.

Shaped from the ECTs' words, these research portraits capture the compelling idiosyncratic stories and will illustrate the factors *within each* ECT (cross analysis) that influenced their work and life in RRR areas. After each research portrait, connections will be drawn to the bioecological theory framing this research, highlighting the interplay between each ECT's personal characteristics, and interactions between their different contextual systems, influenced their development, experiences, and wellbeing in RRR Australia during a school year.

4.1 Portrait of Ava

I am a second year out primary teacher; I won a full-time role straight out of university, at a small primary school in a regional farming town. As I grew up in the metropolitan capital city and my family is based there, I didn't consider moving out to the country; it was a shock to the system but an amazing learning experience. I did not have any connections or prac teaching experience in the country. A friend of mine said, "My sister's school is looking for staff and are considering graduates". I looked up the town's location on the map, it was three and a half hours from the city. I thought that was manageable and maybe I could move, although it was a bit of a daunting task. I asked my partner and he said, "Let's do it let's go"; that was a big support saying he would go with me.

After an interview and visit to the school, I felt really wanted and appreciated; they thought I was good enough as a graduate to take on a whole class for a full year. They had seen my worth. They put a lot of faith in me.

Regarding the regional area, I didn't really know what to expect; I imagined the regional farming town to be a lot smaller; a deserted street with the little general store and that was all. I didn't know or understand what the people in the community would be like; I imagined clichéd town folk. The town felt small but not claustrophobic, and the community was really welcoming, happy, and grateful to see my partner and me - not quite as stereotypical as I imagined.

My first term of teaching was the most intense time; it was horrible and hit me hard in the first couple of weeks. I was so scared and overwhelmed that teaching was so different. It felt weird not having a mentor teacher; it was just me, no one telling me what to do. I could do what I wanted and that was quite exciting yet uncomfortable. It was scary when I realised it was just me and no one was coming to help in the classroom. I had no idea what to expect in taking this leap of faith nor any idea what was to come.

I am in a much better state than the previous year - my biggest black hole. I struggled with my mental health, especially not being able to see the positives in what I was doing, trying to bring myself down by focusing on things I could've done better. In Term One, there was so much going on. I struggled when the time frame between planning and teaching grew smaller. I got to the end of the term and didn't feel ahead. I knew what I wanted to teach but finding resources was time-consuming. A goal was to have my resources complied and be overly prepared for the unknown.

When Term Two began, I thought, "I have to do this all over again!" It was a shock, one which university couldn't fully prepare me. The intensity was unlike anything pre-service teachers (PSTs) get on their practicum; teaching was much longer with more administration which was mentally exhausting. But every early career teacher was going through that same shock. I had connections to university friends and shared with them that "I'm dying. I'm so tired. I've never felt like this before." It was so real, exhausting, and a massive shock. Preparing lessons, filling out mandatory reports, sending notes home, or parent teacher conferences; it was all that other stuff that was new and scary, it took up time and added to the exhaustion.

I hit a point in Term 2 when I realised that I can't keep comparing myself to experienced teachers. My teaching wasn't going to be like them; I can be inspired by what they do but had to teach my own way. As much as full-time teaching was exhausting, I saw worth in what I was doing, proud that I took that chance, it was rewarding as I was pretty successful at it. It was an intense time trying to keep pushing through, knowing it would get better. It got easier when I kept asking for help, made time to reflect, and built relationships with people.

I never doubt the time and effort I put into relationships. I feel comfortable at the site, and am very fortunate to have fantastic, kind staff. They looked after me, made sure I was OK, popped their head in asking if I needed anything or someone to help; it was such a kind gesture. To look after my wellbeing, I sought out others to chat and made time to talk with colleagues. I found that having someone to share the struggles, the exhaustion, and the darkest of moments together, encouraged me that I will get through this and it's okay. Debriefing with other teachers was important and made me realise that it wasn't just me, everybody else is going through this as well. On a Friday afternoon each week, a fellow staff member would lie on the floor of the classroom exhausted. We always debrief and chat about our day, the students, what went well, what didn't go well, the little wins, have a giggle, and share those moments of pride. Having someone to talk to, who was also a teacher, who gets it, who knows the students, was such a support. I never felt like I was separate, that I wasn't on par with anyone else, or any less experienced. It was really reassuring not to be singled out as new, like I didn't know what I was doing.

Initially, I did not want to be annoying and ask so many questions, but once I built that relationship with other staff, I thought I could ask for help. Although I wanted to ask for help, I did not always need to ask for help. I realised I was capable to solve my problems; staff with more experience could guide me but I could also take time to think about it and come up with a solution by myself. There are three early career teachers at school; my principal said I was a true leader for the early career teachers, paving the way, and setting an example. I had a real sense of confidence and self-belief that others saw that I was doing a good job. I don't feel like I am putting a mask on being a teacher.

At the end of a tricky year, I reminded myself that the students were happy and genuinely wanted to be there in my classroom. I had taught them something and I was doing okay. Even if I weren't teaching the students everything, they didn't know that, they didn't care, they were happy they wanted to come to school. There were some really tricky kids with tricky experiences. Relationships meant more than the curriculum did, relationships support me in being able to work with and support those kids. I worry about kids and what was going on at home. My brain doesn't shut off. It is emotionally draining. I knew so much about the families living in such a small community, nothing went unnoticed. The downfall of student relationships is I care so much.

In my second year of teaching, I felt more confident and in a better place. I could better handle the curriculum, knew what to teach, how to teach it, what to expect, where to set my standards, and how far I can push my students. It was still exhausting and mentally draining but a

lot easier. Slowly but steadily, I am making improvements, being reflective and observant in my own teaching and my own downfalls, thinking about what didn't work or what needed adjustment to find the best way to teach my students. My main goal was to improve my practise; it may not be perfect, but things were in place, such as professional development, to help me improve and be better prepared and organised.

My work-life balance isn't great, I am terribly unsatisfied. In my first year of teaching, I spent a lot of time at school. I was the first at school (7am) and the last leave (6pm). As I am more confident, built up more resources and better planned, I adjusted arriving to 8am and leaving at 5pm. That was a big improvement for me, I am proud of myself for better managing my time. There were moments when I was just coping, doing terrible, and things didn't work. And moments when I felt I was okay, I'm doing all right and can make it to the end of the day. Often my brain doesn't shut off when I am home as I think about what I need to do for the next day.

Strategies to maintain my wellbeing include making time to be at home and seeing the value and importance of family and friends, and not using them as an excuse not to do work. The workload is pretty intense, but there were times when work did need to happen and when it did not. I set myself a holiday goal of at least one week to accomplish nothing school related. It was important that I make time for the things I love that aren't work related; for me, it is dancing. As there isn't much dancing in the regional town, I drive to the city where I am still connected to the dance company where I had previously worked. It is a big support to do what I love and not feel the stress. I am in my element, my happy place, just love and passion; there was no stress even in the heaviest of moments. Although I love teaching, it is a lot of hard work. But dancing is so different; that little teacher voice in the back of my head shuts off. Although it is a long drive to go dancing in the city, I would go insane without that escape to switch off. That's what matters to me, I would've gone insane without it.

Teaching is a big commitment; my relationship with my partner is the biggest struggle. Although my partner was working in hospitality in the regional town, our working hours didn't always align. We definitely struggled with not seeing each other during the school term; I didn't have time to spend at home. I know this wouldn't be forever. I remind myself to spend time with him and put work aside. My relationship needs to matter more and finding that balance is tricky. We both count down the days to the holidays for that time together.

My entire network is in the capital city. Visiting family and friends and getting that reassurance from them was supportive. Big debriefs with my mother, who is also a teacher, takes

a big weight off my shoulders because she understands. Keeping that connection to the city network keeps me sane but it also meant I was not spending time with my partner in the country; it is a tricky balance.

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My second year of teaching was very different from my first year, when it was all new and I was unsure whether I was doing everything right. I flourished in my relationships with my students, they are my number one priority, I have a heart full of love to give to them. They blow me away every day with their amazing questions and their excitement for learning new things. I build my students up, help them believe in themselves, that they can do it. I see so much growth in my students and in myself. Teachers can't get anywhere without those relationships with students, it is at the forefront of everything teachers do.

My partner is very supportive of the commitment that teaching requires, he understands my obligation with school and that takes time out from being at home. My mum makes a big difference and helps my sanity. Being able to talk to her, understanding each other's situations, offering advice, getting a different perspective, and sharing our successes keeps me positive. I have supported a new teacher who will pop in and ask me questions; I feel like he values me as someone who he can come to, that is a nice feeling.

I am getting more established, more confident, more organised, better managing my workload at school, and making more time for my physical health. I am maintaining a reasonably good diet, but I get stuck as there are temptations at home. There's so much chocolate, I can't stop myself from eating when it comes to tough days and report writing. This year, I have been looking after myself a lot more mentally. I put my mental health more at the forefront. I am managing a lot better and easier by not taking my work home and having the systems in place to help me plan and mark outside of school hours. Long days make me tired. I want to take control over my health and make sure I'm not sinking into bad habits. As a goal, I don't want to deal with bad habits at this early stage in my profession and dig into a deeper pit by not managing my work-life balance.

Next year, I will have a similar role at the same school. I already know some of the students as opposed to coming in fresh and not knowing anything about my cohort, the school, or my colleagues. I absolutely love where I teach, love the school, students, and staff.

Seeing students and family out and about was overwhelming at first, but it is wonderful knowing where your students are coming from, knowing their parents, their home life. It gives me

insight into why the child is the way they are and what is happening at home; it makes such a difference. I never felt that way in city schools, teachers rarely get to see families. The parents from the regional town pick the kids up, pop in to see me; I love the strong relationship and connection with parents. It is a drawcard for the country-style of living.

This year, I've been thinking about what I want to do. Do I want to be closer to my family and friends in the city, or remain in the country? I am really weighing up my options. The biggest thing drawing me back to the city is wanting to be closer to my family and friends, but being able to visit them makes things a lot easier. I'm okay with seeing them every so often and communicating with them via phone.

If my partner and I move back to the city, it will be in a couple of years' time when I'm eligible for the 'right of return' after five years of regional teaching. I will spend 5 years out here and consider what we would like to do. But we really love the community, I love knowing the families of my students.

Why would I move when I have amazing staff, happy in my job, my partner is happy, we have cheap rent, all the benefits of those country incentives living in the country. Why would I move back where it is expensive to live and back to jobs we're not happy in? Why would we give up what we have and love right now for something that may not be better?

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In a small area, everyone knows everything; I knew where things were and who people were. Be aware that wherever you go in a community, you'll see parents, kids, and people you will know, so either fight it or embrace it. Engaging with the community is a real positive. Isolating yourself is never going to be positive. Being part of that connected community has a positive for my wellbeing; I feel like I belong and more like a local; I'm not just a city girl living in the country.

I have been fortunate to take on the opportunities at school. Little things popped up which were positive, enjoyable, and a learning opportunity; something I wouldn't get from a metropolitan school. At a country school, there is more fluidity to take on those opportunities if you were willing to put your hand up. I have attended fundraising meetings and helped organise a big fair; it was enjoyable to do those extra things. Putting my hand up for those opportunities and doing the extra things that make me stand out and it looked good from employers' standpoint, so it was a win-win.

An intimidating leader is no good; have someone who you respect and respects you, who is approachable, who won't judge you, and is there to support you. Genuine relationships between mentors, leadership, and early career teachers are so important; you can send an email but that's not the same as a human connection with somebody.

Mentors must be someone who still has that passion and isn't cynical about students or the job but are still in it for the right reasons. That attitude to have right off the bat is hard to determine in a person, but you notice it. As an early career teacher, I don't want to hear the cynicism and dislike for the job, or who has been teaching for 40 years and can't be bothered anymore. I don't need someone to instil that mentality in me. I need someone who continued to want to be a teacher and who was there for the right reasons. Early career teachers needed someone who still loves teaching, who motivates me when I'm feeling overwhelmed and helps me see the reward at the end of the journey, who helps me to remain positive and continue sticking with it when times were tough – a mentor who wanted to connect with you.

No advice is going to fully prepare you for what's in store. Be prepared for the unknown. It's going to be fricking hard, it's a lot of hard work, and it's a shock to the system.

4.1.1 Understanding Ava's story

Personal characteristics influenced Ava's experiences, such as her initial shock and being overwhelmed in her first term of teaching, to her struggles with mental health and challenges with switching off her thoughts. She drew comparisons between herself and experienced teachers, leading to feelings of self-doubt, but realised that she needed to find her own teaching style and approach, rather than trying to emulate others. Ava's school microsystem supported her professional development and personal wellbeing. Recognition from her principal and building relationships with students and colleagues, especially those with whom she could debrief and share experiences when needed, were significant interactions. City connections to her mum and dance group were support systems that also influenced Ava's wellbeing. Balancing work and life was a struggle for Ava, illustrating the mesosystemic interplay between her work and home microsystems. Work commitments and spending long hours at school, arriving early and leaving late, made maintaining a relationship with her partner challenging. The RRR community embraced Ava and her partner; this warm reception from the community helped Ava feel accepted and supported in her new context. Ava's transition from university to full-time teaching, her experiences during her first and second years of teaching, as well as relocating to a RRR area, illustrated the changes, challenges, and growth she has undergone across time.

Ava's story was one of resilience and reflected the interactions between person-, micro-, meso- and exosystemic levels of the bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In the telling of her story, she acknowledged elements of personal needs, wellbeing, challenges, and capacities and how these were influenced by, and influence, the context in which she teaches, the rural social space (Reid et al, 2010). Her reflections provided a window into what contributed to her resilience and connects to the findings of Papatraianou et.al. (2018), who stated that resilience involves "both the *availability* of environmental and personal resources, and individuals' *navigational competence* which enables them to recognise, manage and utilise these resources in ways that enhance their resilience" (p. 895). Ava used microsystemic resources, including dance and her partner and family, but acknowledged the importance of leadership, mentors, relationships with students, families, colleagues, and acceptance by the community (exosystem) as fundamental to initially surviving then thriving in her career.

4.2 Portrait of Bridget

I was already living here before I decided to go into teaching. I moved to the region by default. I worked in areas that didn't suit my personality. Teaching was something I've been thinking about for about 10 years. I decided to do the degree, walked into the campus, and it just felt right. I completed my education degree and began teaching in a coastal regional area over the past year and a half. The reason I became a teacher was to make a difference in students' lives. I have a passion for education, I value education. In my previous career, I didn't feel I was sharing my passion for education; that's where I get my meaning, I'm not being selfish with what I know, I'm giving it away and sharing it.

There was a lot of negative rumours about the school; it was a rough school, the kids were very disengaged, there's no respect for teachers; there's no respect for education. Working class country people don't instil in their children that education is valuable - I was expecting to encounter that, but that's not what I've found when I started teaching.

I started casual relief teaching but, getting sporadic work, I was a little bit more stressed. It wasn't what I expected from teaching; different students every day, never knowing what subjects to teach until the morning. Casual relief teaching wasn't what I wanted but I guess that's where everyone needs to start. Picking up a full-year temporary engagement improved my wellbeing. I felt confident that I had work every day; the consistency of seeing the students every day, building relationships with students and staff, and planning my own courses and units. The first term was

really good, I never felt too much burnout which was great. I picked up a temporary engagement, but still didn't have a permanent position.

In my first year of teaching, I wanted to do my best and prove that I was a good teacher. Not only to the school, but to myself. I invested too much into my teaching life, rather than myself. I wanted to prove myself and I was putting my health and wellbeing second. I wasn't eating properly and put on a bit of weight, only eating once a day and unhealthily too. It started to have an impact on my relationship; the only person I was seeing was my husband and students at my school. I didn't want that to continue. I didn't want to forget about myself. If I wasn't feeling well, I wasn't going to be my best. When I leave school for the day, I am done. I made an effort to change my diet and make time for myself; I joined the gym for group fitness and seeing friends who I hadn't seen for six months. I tried to turn it all around and it's been better. I'm taking advantage of what is in the regional area.

The moments that stand out the most is the connections with the kids, when my students let me know how they see how much I like being there. You are not just there because you have to be. I'm lucky to work in a supportive English faculty, the teachers like and support each other and work well together. I'm the youngest teacher or who has been teaching for the least amount of time. We are all intuitive with each other's emotions, it's obvious when somebody is not having a good day, because we know each other very well. There are times when you can tell someone is not themselves and I don't hesitate to ask if they're okay.

When I was teaching casually, the Head Teacher of English said we want you here and we're going to find every means possible to keep you teaching here. I felt that I really fit in, in that context at the school. I fit in with the students but with the faculty as well. They wanted to keep me but didn't have a full term of work. I went to a different school, a different context, everything was done a little bit differently. At one school, all of the programs were written collaboratively, and everyone teaches them. At another school, I was able to write my own program for the term; it was excellent to have that opportunity, autonomy, and creativity.

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I'm continuing to find balance between work and home life. The ridiculous amount of administration that teachers needed to do takes away from building resources for my students. All these extra things that come from the top down that we need to do, teachers busting their guts, taking on the extra workload - those little things are what hinders some teachers from being more

successful in their jobs. The intentions are good about wanting a better learning experience for students. But, at the end of the day, teachers need to be trusted a little bit more, that we're doing what we need to do in the classroom. All of the paperwork that we need to do on a daily basis is very time consuming.

Meal prepping is important and helped my health. I was going to work without lunch, working all day, then leaving work with a splitting headache because I forgot to eat. Planning ahead and preparing meals has really helped me this past term.

I'm not a permanent teacher. At the start of Term 3, the teacher I was filling in for returned to the school. No one told me, that was really unprofessional. The executives didn't communicate this teacher's return; those were a few stressful weeks for me. I didn't say anything, keeping it to myself and pushing on. I got really bad anxiety. It was hard for me not knowing what was happening; the job insecurity, losing the students I was building relationships with. I'm very attached to my classes but it's not about me, it's about the kids. I don't think it's good for the students to have inconsistency in who's teaching them. I had to draw the line between keeping it to myself and that 'this is the nature of being a temporary teacher'. When you're a temporary teacher, you don't really have a right to say anything. This is the nature of the job, I'm expendable, you feel like you're not as valued as the permanent teachers are valued. If I did the right thing and made the right choices, that would be recognised.

Expressions of interest for next year came out; the Deputy Principal encouraged me to apply as they didn't want me going anywhere. I felt good to be recognised for doing a good job, but it depends on what positions are available. When you're temporary, you have to take what's available, I was willing and able to work outside of my discipline area, even though I'm passionate about English, wherever my skills would be the most beneficial to the students. As an early career teacher, I needed to build my skills and my practise with professional development; I didn't want to go back to day-to-day casual teaching, it's not for me. It's not why I became a teacher.

In a regional area, the lifestyle is very quiet, relaxed, and beautiful. It is a small town but there is a lot to do. My husband and I enjoy living down here, we have lots of friends who are more like family to us. I grew up in the city, but it's rewarding working in the regional area. I'm spoiled with the lifestyle, the diversity of kids, and the relationships I build on a daily basis. We have these real country kids with great personalities and skills; experiencing students from different walks of life is amazing. A huge part of the community down here is the Indigenous community. I have built

relationships with the Indigenous students and the Indigenous liaison officer; it's rewarding seeing them outside the classroom, they're always very happy to see me and meeting their parents.

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A well-known reputable university in the area helped support me to transition from studying in regional Australia to working in regional Australia. Something is needed to draw more students away from city universities because once pre-service teachers' study in the area, they would have connections with the practicum schools in those regional areas. More incentives, such as fee reductions or rental subsidies, may help to get university students to study in regional areas.

On social media, a lot of teachers, who are in the city, are being terribly treated and complain about not having work. There are reasons people are tied to a location, but it wouldn't be the case for every single teacher who was struggling to get work in the city. Teachers should be more willing to move out of the cities and see what was available in regional areas; their skills could benefit the kids who are living in these areas. There are social media comments complaining that there are too many teachers in the city; in my regional area, we have a shortage of teachers. More incentives need to be in place to get teachers to these areas.

It is so sad that the regional area has a shortage of casual teachers. There were days when my school collapsed classes because there weren't enough casual teachers to cover the lessons for a day. We had an ongoing music position, which was filled temporarily by untrained music teachers as there weren't any trained ones in the area. Young graduates, who aren't married and don't have a home purchased, are capable of moving away from the city if they were willing. The most negative comments I've heard is about wellbeing of casual teachers and job insecurity, that there are only so many permanent positions. I don't know how to fix that problem; a lot of the teachers I graduated with are still teaching casually; they are the most negative about teaching.

More professional development for early career teachers in regional areas would be nice. I have travelled far for my professional development, and it is quite expensive to travel to the major capital cities. The state's Teachers Federation provide early career teachers with conferences and workshops, but only if you are part of the union; it's not offered by the Department of Education.

A benefit of working in a regional area is the opportunity to teach a broad range of students from different backgrounds, such as dairy farmers, which makes it more interesting and rewarding. I don't know what it's like to teach in the city, but I love the regional area, love the kids, and love the school.

If someone were arriving to a regional or rural area, they must make the effort to get involved and take advantage of what is around the area. Try things out rather than going to work, then home, then work, then home; that can really take a toll. If you were working in the area, take anything and everything that is offered by the school. I taught outside my subject area. Build relationships with the schools and show them you want to be there, and not that you're there because you have to be. There are two public schools and two independent schools in the area; if you didn't make a good impression at one of those schools, then your options run out.

There is so much to do in the regional area. My husband and I go stand-up paddle boarding, fishing, mountain bike riding. The snow is two hours away for snowboarding on weekends and school holidays. It is a beautiful place and a shame we have a teacher shortage.

4.2.1 Understanding Bridget's story

Bridget's personal characteristics, such as her passion for education and desire to make a difference in students' lives, were central to her identity as a teacher. Positive relationships with her students, especially her connections with her Aboriginal students, and a supportive English faculty were aspects of her school microsystem. Other microsystems were her interactions with her husband enjoying the quiet, relaxed lifestyle and her friends who felt like family. She reflected on how investing too much in her work came at the expense of her health and wellbeing; this mesosystemic influence resulted in challenges in her relationships and self-care. Bridget made conscious efforts to prioritise self-care, including changing her diet, joining a gym, and reconnecting with friends to improve her overall wellbeing. Exosystemic influences included her job insecurity and the limited availability of permanent teaching positions. Bridget found casual relief teaching stressful and unpredictable. While picking up a full-year temporary engagement improved her wellbeing, she lamented not having a permanent position. Her uncertainty about her teaching position and the lack of communication and interactions from her leaders, an unfavourable microsystem interaction, caused Bridget to feel undervalued and anxious. Bridget highlighted the teacher shortages in her RRR area and shared her initial misconceptions of RRR students, parents, and education reflecting the influence of broader societal macrosystems.

Bridget's story provided a sense of surviving in a system that presented barriers to thriving in her career. While Bridget enjoyed the rural lifestyle and relationships with her partner, students, and colleagues. she faced uncertainty in her working life and yet she stayed. Lampert et al. (2023), in researching why people stay in hard-to-staff schools, noted that "social, political, and economic conditions affecting teachers' work in these schools is far from simple; rather, it reflects a complex

and fluid environment shaped by a range of current circumstances and dilemmas that impact on teachers' work" (p. 3). Even though Bridget highlighted the shortage of teachers in her RRR location, she was unable to secure a permanent teaching position. While valued by her school leadership team, Bridget's career was being limited by exosystemic political and economic conditions which affected her capacity to thrive in her RRR context.

4.3 Portrait of Charlie

I'm city born and raised. I was unsatisfied with my current job and unable to find a job I wanted, so I chose to complete a teaching degree. I saw the teaching profession as psychological engineering, putting psychology in to practise to make a product or service.

I didn't have any prior knowledge of rural or regional teaching. Although my short-term contract work in regional schools was enjoyable, I always returned to my city home when finished. My short-term contracts led to an offer of a one-year teaching contract in a regional agricultural school. My motivation for regional teaching was my lack of success elsewhere. It was a job; I did whatever I needed to do to get permanency. The move as an opportunity for me to grow up and move out of home, it was hard leaving home. I established a government-provided house, a four-bedroom rental home on a big block of land opposite the school. Everything is more expensive and takes longer. I borrowed a whole bunch of furniture and appliances; it was a big outlay of cash to get started.

Living across the street from the school meant I was geographically close to most of my students. When I bumped into families, I was pleasant and charming. Every new person that moves to the regional area must enfold their way in that community's scheme. New people must fit in to how the community sees everyone else, fit into its web. If you don't, you end up being an outsider. The community won't be unkind, but they aren't going to be your best friend; they may not go out of their way for you unless you fit into that scheme.

The first year, my weekends were not my own. I had to establish myself as a strange new person. I didn't get out that much in my first year, I didn't have a lot of free time, I was at home doing work. It affected my health. My diet crashed as I stopped eating well; I wasn't disciplined in taking care of my body. It is better now but in the first couple of months, it was hard. Sometimes I have those crappy days but get over them. Teaching is a hard job; it is emotionally draining, intellectually draining, and for some it's physically draining. Although my weekends aren't entirely

my own, I can choose to do nothing, lie in bed all day, and no one will complain. The world isn't going to fall around me.

Every school holidays, I travel to see my family. This is a non-negotiable and I'm uncontactable during this time. I needed those opportunities to remove myself from school contact or I'm going to lose myself in it and forget to enjoy myself. If I thought about school, I write it down and put it out of sight. I'm not married to the job. I made the conscious decision not to bring too much work home. Last year, I worked 50 to 55 hours a week, I vowed to myself that would not be my future forever. I'm down to a more reasonable 45 hours and think I can maintain this. Teaching made me an extrovert, but I'm still an introvert and need to be by myself to wind down and spend time with people in little chunks.

My Head of Campus is the greatest person in the world. She is one of my 'ride or die' people, a high-quality person who I would walk behind into hell if I had too. My Head of Campus is so supportive beyond fault, even in my personal life as I didn't have any family close by. She is more nurturing than a boss is expected to be, which is nice. She never made me feel stupid or unappreciated, she always loved what I had to say. If she wasn't the Head of Campus, I wouldn't have stayed at the school.

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In Term 4, I wasn't happy. It felt like I was pushing crap up hill. I have no recent memory of being happy at work. I wasn't able to sit and be. Family tragedies put a chink in my armour, but life goes on. My Head of Campus continued to be a support. I wouldn't be able to do my job and would have quit a month ago if it weren't for the ongoing support she offered. She is a woman of infinite patience. When a student's mother made all sorts of unfounded accusations against me for unprofessional practise and negligence, my Head of Campus was extremely supportive, helped me reframe the situation, and offered the necessary support I needed for the psychological injuries I suffered. She improves my professional practise and keeps a watch full eye on my psychological health.

To improve my assertiveness, I am seeing a counsellor as I feel like a doormat when trying to defend myself. The process helped me to understand that some things are not my responsibility or fault, and to detach myself from other people's actions. I have never been good at compartmentalisation, the idea of putting parts of my life in boxes, but I'm erecting those barriers - school things and personal things - never the two shall meet.

I have three close friends that live within walking distance, we regularly see each other to have dinner or coffee together. They are roughly my age with similar interests, we get along well and depended on each other to be happy and healthy. Making new friends who aren't from school, especially at the community arts group, allows me to focus my attention and talent on things that aren't curriculum or students.

One good thing is that my job doesn't significantly change next year. Consistency helps me; I've got the same subjects, most of the same students, I'm in the same place with the same staff, with the same colleagues. I don't have to start over, I can just build, so the stress is reduced.

The reason why I want to stay is it's a job and permanency came so quickly. I like the school, the colleagues, and the community. I'm rural but not in the middle of nowhere, it's still liveable. I wouldn't be happy or do a good job if I were living super remote because it's extremely isolated. Those jobs are for people who love the outdoors and don't desire to frequently come back to a big city.

For two reasons, I'm not going to stay in the regional area forever. I'm looking for a school which allowed me to teach the subjects I want. I want to come back to the city because I miss my friends and living in a big city. I miss shopping centres and cinemas and restaurants and cafes. I will stay until my fifth year of permanency then I can request a transfer to a metropolitan school and retain permanency.

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Coming straight from university, pre-service teachers are fed literature about inquiry-based learning, common-based learning, STEM, integration; don't attempt these for at least a term. Beg borrow and steal; don't be innovative in your first year. Don't walk into a school with an agenda or manifesto; just rock up, set up a classroom routine, do what was needed, and get through the day. Don't go in believing you were going to change it all overnight; if you do, you will fail, and you will hate yourself. In the first term, be conservative in how you do things, meet everyone in your faculty, know what makes them tick, and find out what your predecessors have done. Build those relationships, meet the families, meet the students. Try everything, improvise, take charge, make decisions on curriculum, classroom layout, and expectations. Just give it a go; if it fails, try something else, you'll be fine. Most of these regional schools won't be as structured or rigid as city schools.

Out of necessity, you are more likely to achieve permanency or a leadership position within five years. At my school campus, the Senior Leader of Learning Improvement is 25 years old with 4 years of teaching experience; the Head of Campus is 35 years old; the Curriculum Leader is 32 years old. Regional schools breed young leaders super quickly.

University should expose pre-service teachers to the rural, regional, or remote areas. Perhaps video conferencing to chat with early career teachers or a line manager to ask what it is like going regional and why one should go. For governments, regional allowances from the Enterprise Agreement, such as locality and living subsidies, need to be retained or improved. Despite cheap housing, travel and food, the cost of living in the regional areas is paradoxically higher than in the city. I receive three complimentary travel allowances but only during the school holidays; at other times, it is too expensive to visit my city home.

Opportunities need to come to us. Government Department's early career teacher programmes should branch out into minor regional areas, not just the major regional centres, to reach all the early career teachers. Despite the distance, early career teachers need to have contact with someone, not just from their school, but from the Government, to touch base and ask "Are you okay? Do you need us to step in? How's your wellbeing? Can you switch off? Is everyone being supportive?" That would support early career teachers and help them stay in the profession because attrition is a huge problem.

4.3.1 Understanding Charlie's story

Charlie's desire for permanency resulted in relocating to a RRR area and "growing up." When professionally challenged, he sought counselling to improve his assertiveness which aided in his professional confidence and helped develop his resources at the person level. Charlie longed for the exosystemic amenities and microsystemic social connections and amenities of the city, such as family and friend gatherings. A lack of access to these valued personal resources contributed to feelings of isolation and his future intentions to return to the city. Charlie acknowledged the critical relationship with his Head of Campus, who provided emotional and professional support, especially when faced with accusations from a parent, which influenced his mental health. This micro-level relationship appeared fundamental to Charlie's wellbeing and survival in the RRR context.

Although he understood the importance of setting boundaries, Charlie wellbeing was compromised as he grappled with maintaining a healthy work-life balance, working long hours, and

feeling overwhelmed by work demands. Exosystemic influences included the government incentives and his involvement in the community arts group; he noted the need for improved government support for teachers in RRR areas. Charlie's perceptions of RRR living and the need to adapt and fit into the community's expectations reflected the indirect macrosystemic sociocultural beliefs that can shape experiences.

Charlie's story of teaching and living in his RRR location highlighted his personal motivations for accepting the position. Of interest, he pointed to lack of success elsewhere and the fact it provided him with a job, opportunities for permanency in 5 years, and potential early leadership opportunities. These incentives, the unwavering support of the Head of Campus, a few close peers, and his own decision to seek personal counselling support, acted as resources when facing significant challenges, such as his professionalism being questioned by one family. While these resources contributed to his 'survival', his story does not reflect that of someone who was thriving in the RRR context. Charlie provided limited reference to feeling satisfied or successful as a teacher, although he mentioned feeling more positive about his next year of teaching given he will know his students and subject areas better. His work ethic showed a strong commitment to teaching but a key theme emerging from Charlie's story was the importance of a supportive mentor in his work microsystem, particularly in the face of stressful events. Rockoff (2008) highlighted the value of skilled mentors in retaining beginning teachers in challenging contexts. He stated that "there is particularly strong evidence that having a mentor who previously worked in the same school as a mentor or teacher has an important impact on whether a teacher decides to remain in the school the following year" (p. 4). Charlie explicitly stated he would not have stayed at the school stay if it weren't for the support of the Head of Campus, emphasising that he would walk behind her into hell if he had to. As with Ava's and Bridget's stories, Charlie's story uncovered a number of other themes of influence to surviving and thriving in RRR locations, but these will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6's Discussion.

4.4 Portrait of Daisy

My husband and I are originally from the country, but I worked in the health profession for 10 years in the city. We knew we would move back to the country, but rural employment in my profession was difficult. I thought 'Which jobs, in a regional area, are there quite a few so that I wouldn't have much trouble of finding work?' I could be a nurse, police officer, or teacher. If somebody asked me what sort of job do you want, I would never say a caring job. Why I became a

teacher is more because I was going rural, rather than I went rural to be a teacher. I never thought I would be a teacher but gave it a shot. I didn't really know what I was in for.

I've only taught in smaller schools; my current school is a small school in a rural dairy town, it's only got 37 kids, one other class teacher, a principal, and two teacher's aides. I get along with my principal, but as a new grad going to the principal is scary. I have a supportive relationship with my colleague, the only other teacher who knows the inside-outs of the school. I felt comfortable to ask the stupid questions and catch up about things; having those really supportive colleagues are important. To maintain my wellbeing, I need school to be an enjoyable and a safe place to go.

Recently, that only other teacher left the school. We got a new experienced teacher so I've had to train her in all the ins and outs of how we do things, but I can only do so much. I'm more of a support for my principal, he comes to me as his go to person. In a small school, we are all on the same page, the principal and the teachers included, so I know a lot about how a school runs and that has built my confidence.

The town has two hundred people, it's tiny. They are a very strongly connected community; there's a couple of key players in small towns, the unofficial mayors, the community leaders. For them to recognise that I am at the school and part of the community, being accepted into the fold, was really nice.

This is a new job, a new profession, and I'm 'gonna' do everything that needs to be done. Why I get out of bed every day is I can make a difference and have a tiny, tiny little impact. The teaching profession is so different from other jobs. You could let it be a 24 hours, 7 days a week job. I've had different jobs but nothing that is all encompassing. Does it get me up at night? Absolutely. But am I going to give up? No, because that's my job. I have a very supportive husband, but he said he didn't realise that this is what *we* were getting into; it's not great to be honest, it can take over your life and that's not healthy. I try to have something apart from school at the forefront of my mind. I live on a little two-acre block, I've got animals - getting home is important to me because I want to be home. I get to work by 7:30 a.m., if I leave before 5 p.m. I'm having a good day. I'm quite happy and comfortable to work most evenings, I might do another hour or two later that evening. I try very hard not to do work on the weekend.

Time for collaborative planning and the importance of having others to bounce ideas off or get ideas are important. Twice a term, four small schools in the area meet as professional learning communities (PLCs) to ensure we are using new evidence, sharing resources, and supporting one

another. This network of teachers (similar grades, similar positions, similar location) is beneficial; it is very helpful to get together and discuss their planning and ideas. I believe I got my current job through my relationships with the PLCs and the small network of principals and schools in the community.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

It has been a messy year; I flourished through necessity. It was a rocky road regarding staff changes; the grade prep-two class had three teachers in one year. Despite advertising for the role several times, it was difficult to get a replacement teacher; one stop-gap teacher lasted ten weeks, a casual relief teacher (CRT) was there for 6 weeks, then no replacement for a while until a replacement late May. All of a sudden, I was the most experienced and longest serving teacher after one year - I didn't actually know anything.

The current replacement teacher, who started in late May, was lazy and didn't carry her share of the workload. In a small school, there's an expectation that each teacher carries their fair share of the load; there isn't a choice. I sucked it up, it was going to be tough. I'm the literacy, the numeracy, the wellbeing, the everything coordinator. Normally these "hats" are halved with the other class teacher, but I had every single one of those hats and it is too tiring. I had way too much work, but I think every teacher has way too much work. When our staffing changes, it will automatically help my wellbeing. It's been a stressful rocky road year, but supporting my principal by lightening his load, doing extra jobs, and assisting him with the school review was a rewarding experience. As my small school does not have a leadership team, the entire staff are the leadership team.

I guarantee I won't leave rural teaching. I live in the country. I've always lived in the country. I've worked in the city in my former life and have no desire to return. I am very confident that I would remain in country teaching. I hope to remain in a small school setting with no more than 50 students. I love the flexibility, little perks, and extra opportunities the small school offers, such as random sport or cooking lessons without permission, small class sizes, and, fortunately, enough staff. Small schools aren't run like business; it is children first and always will be.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Quick progression is a way for early career teachers to flourish in rural schools. Although I never want to be a principal, I will be Acting Principal mid-next year and it will be a fantastic opportunity for me, with only two-year's teaching experience.

The extra hour of planning time offered to first-year graduate teachers by the State Government was wonderful. I feel my university did not equip me with behaviour management, my weakest point. The whole teaching degree should consist of teaching rounds; I learned so much in my 6-week teaching practicums, to get into the school environment and feel part of the team.

Schools need a flexible principal who prioritises *you* and who has your back; I know other teachers with a principal who is inconsiderate of staff wellbeing.

There's always lots of little hurdles, there will never be enough hours in the day. Have reasonably strict boundaries and stick to them. You don't have to reinvent the wheel and create every resource from scratch, it takes way too much of my time. One would never be able to do it all. Don't give up on the things you enjoy, life must be suitable for you and your family. You must draw the line somewhere and should set boundaries; the only person that can do it is yourself. You could let teaching take over your life; that's not healthy.

4.4.1 Understanding Daisy's story

Daisy's country-born background influenced her career change, relocation from the city, and her intentions to remain in RRR teaching. Her school microsystem consisted of three teaching staff and two ESOs (education support officer); due to the closeknit nature, Daisy created strong relationships with her colleagues and principal and gained insights into the school's operations. Influencing her development was the PLCs, which allowed her to network, communicate, and support other RRR teachers. Despite Daisy's supportive husband and recognising the need to set boundaries, she struggled with balancing her home life and schoolwork (her mesosystem), often working long hours, and believing that teaching could take over one's life. Exacerbating her feelings of exhaustion and being overwhelmed was the challenge of filling a teaching position and retaining staff at her school. This macrosystemic issue influenced Daisy by increasing her workload with additional responsibilities. With continued staff turnover, who were already minimal in number, Daisy had to take on multiple roles, including literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing coordinator. Her resilience over the school year led to the opportunity of becoming Acting Principal the following year, highlighting her profession growth across time. Being part of a small, tightly knit community, especially her interactions with community leaders, helped Daisy feel accepted and valued.

Daisy's story provided an interesting example of the potential for rapid growth for an ECT. She commenced the year with being scared of going to the principal to becoming his 'go to' person and relied on another staff member to support her transition to the school. Daisy's person level

resources and dispositions developed over time as she was taking on the role for others displaying her capacity for informal leadership. While acknowledging the support of her principal, Daisy's sense of confidence was evident in her use of the word 'flourishing' on two occasions when referring to her work. She presented a sense of thriving on the challenges thrown her way even though it has been a 'stressful rocky road' at times. Meirink et al. (2019) found that "teacher leadership is often connected to experienced or expert teachers as it is assumed that a certain level of knowledge and experience are needed to effectively improve the quality of teaching" (p. 243), however, they acknowledged that beginning teachers, when well supported, can achieve positive outcomes in leadership roles. Daisy's successful growth, provided through opportunities in her small RRR school, proved a contributing factor to her thriving.

4.5 Portrait of Edward

I worked for 10 years for the government in the city but realised it didn't motivate me. After our second child, I took three months off. I thought about what motivated and energised me, such as reducing the inequality in the world. I saw re-training as a teacher as a way to reduce inequality in the world. I saw teaching could achieve this outcome. I can't change everything, but I can have an impact and try to reduce the level of inequality in my community and give these kids a foundation in doing the same work in their own lives. Becoming a teacher was a substantial pay cut for me, but it's doing what's important, the money isn't as important as the job. The plan was to re-train and to live and teach in the country. My wife, my two young children, and I moved to a small rural inland hamlet in Australia. My expectations were surpassed.

From day one, the uni made a point of making sure the pre-service teachers felt like a teacher. For me, teaching is mentoring with the syllabus. I'm a Bambi teacher but a grown-up teacher. I was lucky to get a job straight out of university as I expected to be casual teaching instead. I get a great buzz to have the ability to help someone, to see the impact, and change their lifestyle and abilities. The actual work is rewarding, it is mentally fulfilling.

The whole term, being out of my comfort zone having four lines of English, has been a real challenge. I'm not an English teacher. I feel like such a fool sometimes, I don't know how to deliver this content. I nod and smile, but in my head, I'm screaming 'I have no idea what I'm doing, and I hope you don't find out.' That's been a challenge. Because I'm a first-year teacher, an average week is between 55 and 60 hours of teaching, prepping for teaching, and marking. It just depends on the week. Sometimes it might be 50, if I have a quiet week.

My mentor teacher is head teacher for my faculty; she always checks in and leave little notes on my desk; the continual reassurance that she's there to talk and offer suggestions. Our new principal's motto is all about kindness, that driver is a pretty nice place to work. It's kind of the culture of the college, that people reciprocate assistance, a collective effort. I feel at home at the school.

Making it to the end of term is a big achievement for me. To have that first term ticked off feels pretty good. From a selfish point, I look forward to the holidays to spend time with my kids. It's a fringe benefit when you're doing those longer weeks, there's a payoff.

I have a very supportive wife who will pull me aside when I am not taking care of myself or getting stressed. About mid-term, I scheduled in three running sessions a week. I put it in my calendar and make sure that time is set aside. It's part of my schedule versus being indulged in and taking time for myself. Setting aside some time to do yoga, walk on the beach, or run around the coastal area, just to recharge a bit. I need to keep reminding myself that if I'm not maintaining my wellbeing, mentally and physically, then it's a dwindling resource. I need to maintain it so I can keep doing the job.

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It was a very hard, long year. I had no idea what I was doing but no one else knew. That was a bit overwhelming. I reassessed mid-year about the reasons why I got into teaching. Why was I doing this to myself? If I'm going to do this crazy job and be this exhausted all the time, I probably should do it for a reason that gives me more energy. The reason why I got into teaching was to work with kids with a low SES (socio-economic status) background and try and make things easier for them, make things better for them. A regional public school, with lots of kids with trauma and lower SES, gave me a call and offered me a contract for next year. I grew up in the country so I relate to these kids because this is my experience. Things work a bit different from the city. It's a pre-determined decision to stay in the country, my family and in-laws are down here in this area.

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As a new teacher, especially if you're working casually on a contract, I feel that pressure to say yes every time makes it hard. It's so hard to deal with. Know your limits and be okay with saying no.

Universities should continue offering and supporting rural and remote placements for early career teachers to experience; it can be hard for people with a family to leave them behind in the city for a couple of weeks. To highlight the benefits of the rural teaching experience, Universities and Governments could have guest speakers come and talk in person. Mentoring from people, who had experience working in remote areas or Aboriginal communities, would be useful; they could chat with an early career teacher on the phone to answer any questions; having someone who understands the context and information could be beneficial.

Make connections with the rural community. In a small community, there are one or two schools, so the students and the parents know everyone. Parents are small business owners and are great sources of information in the area. Try incorporating the local business culture and stories from the area into the classroom and the learning programs, and also working with the Indigenous communities and making connections to Country.

4.5.1 Understanding Edward's story

Edward's personal values were central to his motivation to become a teacher, such as his desire to reduce inequality and make a positive impact to students. The interaction between personal characteristics and the macrosystem's broader societal issues influenced Edward's decision to leave his permanent teaching position for a contract role teaching low SES students with trauma backgrounds. Edward's school microsystem had the culture of reciprocal kindness and his interactions with his mentor provided the professional support he needed, especially as he averaged 55 to 60 hours a week for teaching and the additional work demands. Also in his mesosystem, he was aware of the importance of maintaining his wellbeing amidst the demands of teaching including proactively scheduling time for physical activities like running and yoga to help him recharge. There were internal conflicts at the person level as Edward expressed feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty about his teaching abilities, particularly when faced with teaching outside his expertise. He referred to himself as a "Bambi teacher", connecting his out-of-field teaching to feelings of inexperience and vulnerability, like the young deer from the classic animated film. Edward's story highlights the journey across time from a government job to changing careers to the teaching profession, and then from his current RRR position to accepting a role at a different RRR school that aligns with his core values.

Edward's story reflected themes at the person and microsystem levels, including the importance of attention to his health and wellbeing, the role of mentors, and the anxiety of teaching beyond his area of subject expertise. He highlighted the same message as the other storytellers,

that one can expect an intense excessive workload in their early years of teaching; this falls in the mesosystemic level of the bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2004), which reduced one's work-life balance and the capacity to thrive. Carroll et al.'s (2022) findings warned that "both early career and rural/remote teachers appear to be at greater risk of stress and burnout" (p. 462), a theme which is elaborated in greater detail in Chapter 6's Discussion.

4.6 Portrait of Fleur

I'm Australian and was teaching for three years in London. My husband and I moved back to Australia, but I couldn't use my qualification as a teacher. I completed a four-year early childhood education degree in Sydney and then moved to Perth because I struggled to find long-term work. After attending a seminar that introduced country teaching in regional and remote WA, I thought I want to do this. There were a couple of reasons that led us to try it. My husband was fed up with his work and not getting satisfaction from it. The prospect of getting permanency after two years if I taught in a remote school was important. If we did go remote, I could work on a lower salary, we could manage that. Relief work in the Kimberly was interesting but it was a huge shock. I'd never been to a remote school at all. I'm glad that I did it. Those few weeks I was trying to figure out if this would be doable and possible. Children were bussed in from elsewhere, and the teachers lived in the community; I really enjoyed that aspect of it, you're right there and walk to work. I applied for the remote teaching service pool with Big Picture Education Australia; there was training, I met the staff and did a work shadow before I started teaching in remote Australia on The Lands. It wasn't where we were expecting, but we gave it a try.

I remember thinking that the land seemed so remote. This vision in my head looking down on it, and there being just desert, like the Sahara Desert. A few houses. Everything was really far away from everything else. No roads and no services. There wouldn't be many kids, but I did think there might be behaviour issues and not many resources. The idea of everything being really, really far is not true. It's a little community – it's far between the communities. The school is on one campus, but there's eight campuses that make up the whole school. Each campus is really far apart, about the size of Victoria. But once you're in the community, you don't need to leave it for anything. Everything is really close. There are roads, plenty of resources, and the internet generally works. There's no pharmacy; I'm on medication, so I forward plan and have all the tablets that I need.

Our accommodation wasn't ready until Week 7 of Term 1, so we were sharing with the principal. Having the kids in someone else's house for a while is stressful and difficult. It was stressful for my husband, for me, the kids. Their wellbeing affects my wellbeing. It was absolutely wonderful to move into our own house.

Towards the end of the term, I was definitely flagging and not wanting to put in extra time. I got frustrated. The worst day I had last term was a series of events, and I thought how can I get through this? I was overwhelmed with everything; how can there be one more thing after another? But I just kept going, I just kept teaching. Everything will get that little bit easier, there's one less thing that's new.

I am thrilled to be working full-time. I feel more confident in the classroom and know who the children are and where they're at. I'm planned and organised. I'm intellectually stimulated. I'm always learning. I just love that about teaching. I feel strongly about providing a really good education to the children, being the best that I can be with what I know, and always having the children and their learning at the forefront.

Pretty much everyone supports me. I have two AIEOs (Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers) who support me in the classroom and I support them. I invited one of my AIEO and her children to my daughter's birthday party; the AIEO made a tiny little basket as a present for my daughter. I was blown away. A cultural liaison, a local elder from the area, invited me to "go bush" with her to look for honey ants and emus. An AIEO came along and answered all of the students' questions. It was a gift to share in their cultural practices and knowledge.

I feel a real sense of belonging. We had a few staff barbeques. School kids pop round to hang out with my children. I've joined the local ukulele group, although I'm more interested in the tea and biscuits afterwards. The curriculum coordinator's husband does odd jobs, cleaning, and gardening, and comes over to fix things around the house.

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There was movement in a positive direction and moments when my practise was improving and progressing. But it is relentless. It is more of a mental hurdle and just working through how it can be perceived in not such a bad light. The unpredictability of who is going to be in class has been quite draining. I'm still taking medication to support my wellbeing. And trying to switch off after school, I'm doing that more and more. Trying to be as organised as I can and do a lot more prep. It doesn't always happen but when I am very organised, that really supports my wellbeing.

Making sure that my family is travelling okay, that they're coping, and that my husband is getting the support that he needs.

I love working here. I'm on a three-year remote contract; if everyone agrees, I can sign up for another year. There are different benefits and perks for staying for certain lengths of time. My family and I have it in our heads that we'll be here for three, potentially four years then move back to the city when my kids to go to high school. They will do a couple of years of high school distance education out here but go back and attend a regular high school.

**

It's a great experience, everyone should do it! Try a remote location and see what it was like, do a work shadow and just experience it; if the Government and Universities were to do that for graduates, that would be good. It also depends on the context and what kind of teachers are wanted by the school as not all of them want new graduates. Education Departments and Universities should have events to break the stereotypes and talk about the regional or remote area, explain what can happen, and what is possible. The stereotype - it would be really hard, how do you do it and get out there - it wasn't hard at all and quite easy physically, just get in a car and drive or jump on a plane. I recommend socialising, finding out about other people, do something that cultivates an interest; if you are interested in something, take charge, and do something.

Professional development in this remote area is quite hard and limiting, people don't always want to do it in their holidays or fly to the capital city for the weekend. Because of the distance, I was paid to do professional development and training during my holiday time. The whole school organised PD (professional development) once a term, staff travelled and were put up in a Roadhouse where we were all together and discussed how things were going.

I recommend making absolutely certain that a full-proof system for available adequate housing is in place, because it is so remote, and everything takes so long. I would hate anyone to go through the same thing that our family went through with housing accommodation.

4.6.1 Understanding Fleur's story

Fleur's story shared her journey from teaching in England, studying education in Sydney, moving to Perth and then relocating to remote WA, illustrating the significant life transitions and the evolution of her career.

Of all the participants in this research, Fleur's story reflected her experiences of working and living in the most remote Australian location and introduced context specific issues such as limited housing, access to medical support, and professional development. The interplay of the different contextual systems greatly influenced Fleur's RRR experiences. An exosystemic issue was the government's ill-preparation of her RRR accommodation, which led to Fleur living in her principal's home and resulting in a time of great stress for her and her family. Mindful of her family's wellbeing, while navigating the demands of her new teaching position as an ECT, resulted in Fleur feeling overwhelmed at certain times. Medication supported her wellbeing, however, her RRR location hindered its accessibility as there wasn't a pharmacy. Other exosystemic factors influencing Fleur's development included RRR training and work shadow program prior to teaching and the limited access to professional development opportunities. Interactions with colleagues at staff barbeques and connecting with her AIEOs, as well as joining the community's ukulele group, helped Fleur feel a sense of community and belonging. Despite Fleur's initial macrosystemic misconceptions of the RRR Australia, working and living in the area changed her perceptions, highlighting how experiencing RRR areas can foster a better understanding and challenge the RRR 'blueprints'.

Her thriving in the location was supported by her microsystems and exosystem, i.e. her family, colleagues, and the close-knit community. At the person level, Fleur had strong self-awareness; she would like to make improvements in her teaching and felt more confident when organised, yet she acknowledged the daily challenges of not knowing who might be in her class for the day which increased the mental stress of her role. There was evidence of a growing confidence and connections with the isolated community and a desire to extend the initial three-year contact. Fleur's initial thoughts on heading to a remote teaching location reflected those found in other research (Hazel & McCallum, 2016, Sharplin, 2002), that there would be 'no roads, no services' and everything would be far away. However, her views shifted once she arrived and discovered a rich and engaged community. She believed everyone should experience remote teaching but warned that macro- and exosystemic factors need more attention.

Summary. This chapter presented the research portraits of the six ECTs stories that subtly illustrated the factors *within each* ECT (cross analysis) that influenced their work and life in RRR areas. Overall, these portraits highlight the complexities of the ECTs' experiences and how the interplay between each ECT's personal characteristics and each of their different contextual systems influenced their experiences and wellbeing in RRR Australia, although they unfolded in

different ways during the school year. Further interpretation and analysis are detailed in Chapter 6's Discussion and subsequent conclusions.

The following chapter is the second of two Findings chapters. Themes generated from RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the ECTs' interviews, and analysed across the layers of the bioecological theoretical framework, were crafted in to research poems, illuminating the factors *across all* ECTs (cross-case analysis) that influences their work and life in RRR areas.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS - POEMS

Chapter 4's Findings presented research portraits generated from the six ECTs stories of living and working in RRR Australia. Each portrait illustrated varied factors *within each* ECT that influenced their work and life in RRR areas. In this chapter, the second of the two Findings chapters, research poems draw on the complete corpus of data to help answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in RRR areas?* Each research poem integrated and compressed all ECTs' experiences into a theme, intensifying their voices and encompassing their rich meaningful perspectives. Framed by the bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the 10 research poems illuminated factors *across all* ECTs (cross-case analysis) that influenced their work and life in RRR areas, such as their personal characteristics and interactions between their different rural places and spaces (Reid et al. 2010) during one school year. The poems offer evidence of factors that contributed to the ECTs experiences and wellbeing and reflected times of thriving but also times of surviving. The main ideas are presented in each poem are provided in this chapter but discussed in more detail in Chapter 6's Discussion that follows.

5.1 Influence of personal characteristics

Emerging from the data were the ECTs' different motivations to teach in RRR schools, their physical and psychological health and wellbeing, and their intentions to remain or leave the RRR area after a year of teaching. Each of the following personal characteristic themes demonstrated how the ECTs' abilities, knowledge, prior experience, and mental and emotional resources (resources), as well as their personality, and cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational factors (dispositions), influenced their interactions, experiences, and growth in RRR areas.

5.1.1 Motivations to go country

I got into teaching to work with kids with a low SES trauma background
make things better for them
so that I can make a difference in students' lives
to reduce inequality in the world
I value education
I had this passion for education

a pre-determined decision to live in the country and to teach

let's give it a shot

now I love it

I could work on a lower salary

we could manage that

Quite a substantial pay cut

money isn't as important as the job

why I became a teacher is more because I was going rural rather than I went rural to be a

teacher

which jobs are there quite a few in a regional area?

I shouldn't have too much trouble finding work

the prospect of getting permanency after two years if we went remote

it was there

It was a job

I was unsuccessful everywhere else

it was an opportunity for me to move out of home

an opportunity to grow up

to try and figure out if I thought that this would be doable and possible

if I'm going to actually do this crazy job

and be this exhausted all the time

I should do it for a reason that gives me more energy

Insight and themes. ECTs reflected on their motivations that led them to become a teacher in a RRR area. Some ECTs were drawn to these areas by their passion for education and a desire to make a positive impact on the lives of RRR students, especially those from low SES backgrounds. This reflected a strong sense of purpose, social responsibility, and a commitment to reducing educational inequalities. For other ECTs, the prospect of job security and the potential for permanency after two years in a RRR school reflected how external factors can influence their decisions. One ECT perceived RRR teaching as an opportunity for personal growth and independence. For career-changer ECTs, teaching meant a lower salary than their previous career, however, they valued the profession more than the money.

5.1.2 Putting health and wellbeing second

I invested too much into my teaching life, rather than myself

I was putting my health and wellbeing second

I wasn't all that disciplined in how I was taking care of my body

a lot of blind spots, one of those is self-care

I was feeling really unhealthy

My diet is atrocious. It is one hundred percent worse

I wasn't eating right

buy pre-prepared food

putting on quite a bit of weight because I wasn't eating properly

going to work without lunch

I had a splitting headache and I realised I forgot to eat

I'm losing sleep

Stuff happening all the time and I wasn't really able to sit and be

I started getting really bad anxiety

it impacted on wellbeing

I've been seeing a counsellor to help

looking after my wellbeing has been seeking out others to chat

Been looking after myself

trying to switch off after school

so that I can keep doing the job

to find balance between work and home life

put my mental health at the forefront

as a priority

making time for myself

to recharge

it's part of my schedule

versus being indulged in

if I wasn't feeling well

if I'm not maintaining my wellbeing

mentally and physically

then it's a dwindling resource

I wasn't going to be my best

I didn't want to forget about myself

making more time for my physical health

setting aside some time to do some yoga

go for a run

group fitness classes

I'm on antidepressant medication

I forward plan so that I have all the tablets that I need

because there's no pharmacy

I made an effort to change my diet

eating healthily

meal prepping is so important

I prepack recess and lunch

need to be by myself to wind down

relax a little bit more

I'm looking forward to the holidays

it's a fringe benefit doing those longer weeks

there's a payoff

don't give up on the things that you enjoy

Know your limits

everybody's limits will be different

set yourself a limit that works with your own life

you have to draw the line somewhere

I'm starting to erect those barriers

that's a school thing

that's a personal thing

the only person who can do that is yourself

Insight and themes. ECTs desired to maintain a work-life balance and aimed to prioritise their psychological and physical wellbeing as a teacher. Holidays were a time to relax and recharge, the 'fringe benefit', offering a reward for working long terms, highlighting the cycle of stress and recovery. Although ECTs acknowledged the need to switch off after school and create boundaries between work and life, this was often blurred as work encroached on their personal time and related to the societal expectations around work and productivity. One ECT shared the challenge of accessing medication in RRR areas, which can affect mental health management. ECTs understood that their health and wellbeing was not an indulgence, but an investment worth prioritising; a resource that must be routinely maintained to effectively perform their work.

5.1.3 Do I want to remain country?

I won't leave country teaching

always lived in the country

absolutely love where I teach

the school and the community and my colleagues

experiencing kids from different walks of life

I relate to these kids because this is my experience

I grew up in the country

Things work a bit different to the city

I want to stay

permanency came so quickly

why would I move when I'm happy in my job?

all the benefits of living in the country in terms of those country incentives

I've been thinking about what I want to do…

the biggest thing drawing me back from country?

I want to be closer to where my family and friends are based

Didn't have any connections out country

there's different benefits and perks for staying

we've got cheap rent

I'm not going to stay on forever

it is in the plan to work here for three or four years

stay until my fifth year of permanency

I can request a transfer to a metro school and retain permanency

those country incentives.

I want to come back

my kids to go to a regular high school

I miss living in a big city

I miss shopping centres and cinemas and restaurants and cafes

or do I want to remain country?

Why would we move back where it is more expensive for us to live, to a job we're not happy

in?

Why would we give up what we have right now which we love?

Insight and themes. ECTs were divided on their intentions to remain or leave the RRR area; wherever their heart and home was factored into their decision. Those who grew up, or established roots, in the RRR area intended to continue working and living in the country. Factors influencing their decision were their existing family in area, loving their school, community, and colleagues, and connections with their students who shared a similar RRR upbringing. Three of the four city-born ECTs were drawn to RRR teaching by the offer of permanency and the guaranteed right-to-return to the city. Similarly, the desire to be closer to their family, friends, to educate their children in city schools, and the amenities of city life, pull these city-born ECTs back home.

5.2 Microsystem influences

Themes coming out of the data included the interactions between ECTs and their immediate environments that influence their experiences and growth in RRR areas. The following themed poems illustrated the crucial roles leaders, colleagues, and students in their work context, as well as family and friends in their home-life context, have on the ECTs in this research.

5.2.1 Quality of a leader

As a new grad the principal is scary a little bit
but she still has to be the principal
So grateful having amazing leadership
the Head Teacher trusted the teachers
has all the time in the world for me
who has your back
makes sure I'm okay and can read my emotions
those little moments made me feel like she gets it
almost has that mum-quality…nurturing and caring
When things have been crazy, she's popped her head in
makes herself available
someone that I can go to very easily
continuous support through all the challenging moments
supports me whenever there is an issue
pops in to see how things are going
checking with you, checking you're okay
who I genuinely knows cares about how I'm going
the greatest person in the world
her motto is all about kindness
high quality people
one of my ride or die people
I'll walk behind them into hell if I have to
Supportive beyond a fault
your principal's prioritising for you
not only for improving my professional practice
even in my personal life
keeping a watchful eye on my psychological health
More nurturing that you'd expect a boss to be
Never made me feel stupid or unappreciated

If she were not the Head of Campus, I don't think I would have stayed

I would probably not be able to do my job at all

I would have quit about a month in

a woman of infinite patience and support

having someone who is intimidating as a leader is no good

some almighty deputy principal who has that stature but isn't approachable

they're not going to judge you, they're going to support you.

Insight and themes. ECTs' experiences with senior leaders (i.e., Principals, Deputy Principals, Heads of Campus, Faculty Heads) were positive, speaking of the qualities that they valued in a leader. ECTs identified desirable leadership qualities based on their interactions and their influence on the ECTs' development. RRR leaders provided professional support and, for some ECTs, personal support for their wellbeing at different times during the year. This highlighted the how the qualities of a leader can influence an ECT's experiences and development in a RRR school and provide encouragement to remain at the school.

5.2.2 Collegial culture

Debriefing with another teacher

we are all intuitive with each other's emotions

who you're surrounded by makes a huge difference

the culture that people reciprocate assistance

staff are really connected and open… lovely and helpful

We're all on par with each other

not singled out as you're new. You don't know what you're doing

everyone sits on the same page

finding a place for me in the setting

I felt that I really fit in

Respecting and valuing my expertise

felt quite comfortable to ask the stupid questions

I could ask for help

they'd always check in

they modelled expectations about a healthy work home lifestyle

moderation groups…the conversations, trading ideas and talking, and complaining about students

we all want each other to get better

It feels good to be part of that community

Supported by my mentor
could relate to what I was feeling
leave little notes on my desk
always checks in
genuinely cares
puts in the time to get to know you as a person
the continual reassurance that she's there to talk to
you can go to them no matter what
A collaborative relationship
Always bounce ideas off her
in planning
give me ideas
offering suggestions
doing reports
moments of support and questions.

Insight and themes. The collegial culture can "make a huge difference" to RRR ECTs. Interactions with colleagues and mentors were reciprocal and collaborative, sharing successes and struggles, fostering a sense of belonging and growth, and lifting one another up. Connections between mentors and ECTs were important. Mentors provided professional and personal support by reassuring, motivating, and encouraging the ECTs during challenging times.

5.2.3 Relationships with my students

I enjoy being in the classroom
I have heart full of love to give to my students
those strong relationships with my students
I enjoy their company
accept they're all different
they are so unique and appreciate who they are
They blow me away everyday

Always my top priority is that relationship with my students
that meant more than the curriculum did
because you can't get anywhere without that relationship
It is at the forefront of everything that you do
it's not about me, it's about the kids
The time and the effort that I put into this relationship is worth it
moments of connection

<div align="center">

moments of little triumphs

when they manage something they have struggled with

when that kid who struggles to read goes up a level

support them and seeing the growth

those little wins are the most rewarding

You taught the kids something

they remembered

They recalled it

They've used it

that lightbulb moment

they're being successful

I was so excited and so happy

to see the impact

I've made a difference

I might be good at this

it isn't a fluke

it's actually me

that is a win

</div>

Insight and themes. ECTs thrived in the classroom with their students. They perceived the effort and time devoted to building student connections and relationships as more important than the curriculum. ECTs appreciated their students' unique strengths, differences, and needs and shared in their students' struggles, triumphs, and growth in their learning. When students showed success, ECTs felt successful.

5.2.4 Relationships matter more

<div align="center">

My family, my entire network, is solely based metropolitan

I still have that support

Every holiday visiting family and friends

this is non-negotiable…uncontactable

If I didn't have that escape

I probably would have gone insane

big debriefs with my mum

getting that reassurance

big weight off my shoulders

helps my sanity

because she understands

</div>

Having home as a nice place to go to is the most important thing

I've got a very supportive partner

always my sounding board

the person that I will whinge to at the end of the day

my husband didn't realise he actually was going to become a pseudo teacher

that this is what we were getting into

it's not great to be honest

We really count down the days until holidays

we know we get that time together

that ability to spend time with my kids when they're on holidays

Work has to be put aside

it was starting to have an impact on my relationship

My relationship needs to matter more

making sure I take that time to spend with him

that balance has been a bit tricky

a very supportive wife who will pull me aside when I am not taking care of myself

very understanding of the commitment that my career requires

I make time to be at home

life has to be somewhere that is suitable for you and your family

making sure that my family is travelling okay and that they're coping

their wellbeing affects my wellbeing

Having the necessary personal support from friends

Making sure I'm staying in touch

And I see my friends

Making friends who aren't school related

trying not to talk about work

friends who are more like family to us down here

We depend on each other to be happy and healthy

Insight and themes. Home was where the heart is for ECTs. Friends and family were a crucial source of psychological support. They provided ECTs with a sounding board and a listening ear for work-related challenges. Some partners understood the commitment and demands of teachers' work, while others didn't anticipate its influence on their lives. As their family's wellbeing affected their wellbeing, ECTs desired to achieve a work-life balance. Holidays offered the opportunity to spend time with family, especially children, and escape the demands of the teaching

profession. RRR friends were viewed as family; ECTs acknowledged the importance of maintaining friendships inside and outside of the school for supporting their own wellbeing.

5.3 Mesosystem influences

Another theme arising from the data was the bidirectional relationship between the ECTs' work and life mesosystems; the following themed poem revealed their experiences of balancing work as a new RRR teacher and its influence on their personal life.

5.3.1 A new teacher – a grad teacher

a stressful year

a pretty rough year

a rocky road

I knew it was going to be tough

I'm new

a new teacher

everyone always says Term 1 is the hardest when you're an early career teacher

it's hard, it's hard to deal with

it's going to be a shock

unfortunately uni can't fully prepare you

That intensity is unlike what you get on prac

I'd be working all day

from six hours,

seven hours,

nine hours in a day where you're at the school

and then you do it again

and again

and again

and then you do it again the next week

I don't really enjoy all the paperwork

all of the paperwork that we need to do on a daily basis is very time consuming

those little things hinder some teachers from being more successful in their jobs

it's the teachers who are taking on the extra workload

teachers need to be trusted a little bit more

we're doing what we need to do in the classroom

as a grad teacher I wasn't super confident

I've got a long way to go with my practice and how to teach it the best way

I do spend a lot of time at school

I'm doing a lot more work

working 50, 55 hours weeks

Arriving at 8 a.m.…leave between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. most nights

stay at school until I've finished all my work

then go home

I like to leave work at a respectable hour, come home

and do another hour or two later on that evening

I made the conscious decision to not bring too much work home

more realistic timeframe of working

I'm quite content to do some of my school work at home

I try very hard not to do a heap of work on the weekend

sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't

I have that autonomy

it was all me…every decision came down to me

I can do what I want

I can run this class how I wanted to run it

that's really quite exciting once you get through that kind of uncomfortable feeling

how have you left me in charge of all these children?

I'm okay

I can do this

I can figure this out

I can wing it if I need to

you make it through the day and something goes right

And things always go right

I know what I'm doing a lot more than I did

I'm very proud of how far I've come

I think back to my first teaching round and I know a lot more now than I did two years ago

I can see a change in my teaching

I feel a lot more settled more confident in the classroom

More self-belief in what I was doing

I still try to do a lot of things myself

I'm planned and organised

a lot more prep prior to each term

I felt a distinct sense of accomplishment

I've conquered a particular professional obstacle

I do a good job…I do my best

It's a pretty cool job sometimes

very proud I can say that I'm a teacher

wellbeing…for new teachers?

no advice is going to fully prepare you for what's in store

be prepared for the unknown

if a new teacher is going to be successful in a rural school

take on those opportunities as a graduate and as a young teacher

putting your hand up

being willing to try new things

take anything and everything that's offered to you

try everything…improvise

I've taught outside of my area

take charge, make a decision on things

Just give it a go

if it fails, try something else

number one, beg borrow and steal

don't be innovative first year

just get through the day

set up your classroom

meet the students

meet everyone in your faculty

meet the families

build the relationships

just do what you need to do

be conservative in how you do things

find out what your predecessors have done

Insight and themes. ECTs perceived teaching as a shock to the system. Their mesosystem, i.e. their daily experiences at school, the long hours, the heavy workload, and the extra administrative tasks, greatly influenced ECTs' wellbeing as they struggled to separate their professional work and personal lives. ECTs perceived their intense workload and significant time commitment as the expectation and the norm for teachers new to the profession, reflecting a common misconception. They believed preparation was key to managing the demands of the

job and made efforts to maintain a work-life balance, such as making a conscious decision to limit work brought home. ECTs reflected on their journey and felt pride in the progress they have made across time, highlighting their development and growth despite the challenges faced and compromised to their wellbeing. ECTs shared their insights and advice for those considering working in RRR schools, such as embracing the opportunities offered, being proactive, and building relationships.

5.4 Exosystem and macrosystem influences

The data generated two themes on the broader contexts that indirectly influenced the ECTs' experiences, wellbeing, and growth in RRR Australia. The following themed poems revealed the ECTs' perceived support from the government and universities for working and living in RRR areas, and their RRR misconceptions and engagement with their community.

5.4.1 Help early career teachers to be supported

<div align="center">

More incentives to get university students to study in regional areas
Something to draw more students away from the city universities
Giving them the opportunity to experience
University could expose their pre-service teachers to the rural setting
some Universities make you do a rural remote placement
have connections with the schools
highlighting the benefits and the experiences
having guest speakers in person
who've had experience working in remote areas, or Aboriginal communities
to answer those questions

there should be more incentive to get teachers to these areas
having these week-long…try it, see what it's like, come out here and do a work shadow
just experience it
in a contract remote for three years
you can sign up for another year
different benefits and perks for staying for certain lengths of time
so much likely to achieve permanency or a leadership position within 5 years
a pretty quick progression
out of necessity

</div>

certain allowances for living regionally need to still exist

that the systems are in place…that the housing is there

Opportunities need to come to us

reaching all of our early career teachers

more than just the major regional centres

go to the minor regional centres

more professional development for early career teachers in regional areas

often I travel very far to any professional development

it's quite expensive

Someone from the department just check in

more formal… buddy system or, mentor system…more formal coaching

that'll help early career teachers to be supported

it'll help them stay in the profession

attrition is a huge problem

it's so sad

such a shortage of casual teachers

to collapse classes because there aren't enough casual teachers to cover the classes for a

day

an ongoing music position

being filled temporarily by untrained music teachers

people complaining about not having work up there in Sydney

treated terrible by the day-to-day work

people need to be willing to move out of the cities

their skills can benefit the kids who are living in rural and regional areas

younger graduates, in their early 20's

aren't married yet

don't have a home purchased in the city

they're the ones that are more capable of moving away from the city

depends on what kind of teachers the schools actually want

not all of them want new grads

that also depends on the context

Insight and themes. ECTs reflected on the university and government support they received, or needed, for working and living in RRR areas. They highlighted the importance of specific incentives to attract teachers to these areas, the value of RRR practicum experiences, and the need for accessible profession development. The ongoing teacher shortage influenced the

ECTs' schools as some RRR teaching positions were challenging to fill, impacting both staff and students.

5.4.2 Community clichés and engagement

<div align="center">

The land seemed so remote

being just desert

like the Sahara Desert

and a few houses

no roads and no services

everything was really far away

far between the communities

it's a small town

but not claustrophobic

I'm not in the middle of nowhere

it's still liveable

I was imagining the really clichéd town folk

they're not quite as stereotypical

A lot of negative rumours

rough school, kids disengaged, no respect for teachers or education

That's not what I've found

You're in a small area

Everyone knows everything

Nothing goes unnoticed

I'm geographically close with half of my students

You know so much about the families

Knowing their parents

bump into them out and about

knowing their home life

it gives you so much insight into why that child is the way they are

that's been overwhelming

either fight it or embrace it

The lifestyle here it's very quiet and relaxed

the drawcard for that country style of living

engaging with the community

people were really welcoming

</div>

feel like I belong

like a local

key players, the unofficial mayors, community leaders, recognise that I am part of the community

being accepted into the fold

fit your way in to the web

fit in to that community scheme

I engaged in community projects outside of school

professional learning communities

arts organisation

regional dance performance

school centenary

a ukulele group

taking advantage of what there is in the area

It's a great lifestyle

Insight and themes. ECTs expected a stark landscape, which contributed to their misconceptions of isolation and desolation. During their year of living and working in RRR areas, ECTs' misconceptions were challenged; the community didn't reflect the clichéd expectations. Being in a close-knit community allowed them to better understand and connect with their students, their families and home life. Fitting into the RRR community's social fabric and being accepted by key figures and community leaders, as well as engaging in community activities and groups, enhanced ECTs' sense of belonging.

Summary. This chapter presented the research poems encompassing all six ECTs' voices and illuminating the factors *across all* ECTs (cross-case analysis) that influenced their work and life in RRR areas. Overall, the findings from the 10 themed poems highlighted the complex and interrelated factors of the ECTs' personal characteristics and the bidirectional interactions between their contextual systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem) that influenced their development, wellbeing, and experiences of working and living in RRR Australia during one school year.

The following chapter, Chapter 6's Discussion and subsequent conclusions, will offer further interpretation and analysis of the insights that have emerged from the findings (Chapters 4 and 5) by connecting to literature detailed in Chapter 3 and other relevant research, as well as sharing ECTs advice and drawing conclusions.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This research explored the experiences ECTs as they work and live in RRR Australia during a school year, and aimed to answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in RRR areas?* Research portraits, detailed in Chapter 4, illustrated the factors *within each* ECT that influenced their work and life in RRR areas. Research poems, detailed in Chapter 5, illuminated the factors *across all* ECTs that influenced their work and life in RRR areas.

This chapter will begin with the discussion and illuminations from the findings. Framed by the bioecological theory and drawing links to wellbeing, it will explain and elaborate on the interpretations and analysis of the findings, contextualising this research to the existing literature, and offering advice to educational stakeholders.

6.1 Factors of influence on ECTs' work and life in RRR Australia

ECTs' stories of their RRR experiences reveal that work *and* life cannot be separated; there is a permeable boundary between these two contexts, the impact of one affects the other and vice versa. For ECTs, they are navigating how the new profession incorporates into their existing self and private life. Their stories of surviving and thriving highlight how the internal and the external, the personal and contextual, shape their wellbeing and experiences of work and life in RRR areas. The interacting factors of influence for ECTs surviving and thriving in RRR areas are summarised in Figures 16 and 17. While the factors have been represented in the figures as separate entities, they interact to generate conditions that, at times, lead to ECTs expressing a sense of thriving in their work and lives while, at other times, feeling overwhelmed and just surviving each challenge coming their way.

Figure 16: Factors of influence on early career teachers thriving when working and living in rural, regional, and remote Australia.

Figure 17: Factors of influence on early career teachers' challenges and sense of surviving while working and living in rural, regional, and remote Australia.

ECTs place great importance on their professional and personal relationships with their RRR school (leaders, colleagues, students) and their home (husbands/wives, partners, and children), their social friendships, and their connections with the RRR community. These relationships and interactions are a crucial support for their personal and professional wellbeing, and enable ECTs to cope, feel capable and connected. ECTs' established relationships, networks, and connections, either in the city or RRR area, play a key role in driving ECTs' motivations towards RRR teaching, supporting their work and life, and compelling them to stay or leave.

ECTs understand that the work demands of the teaching profession is an immense commitment. They love teaching and their impact on student learning, but the ECTs perceive the intensity of their work as the norm, the expectation and the reality. All are grappling and dissatisfied with their work-life balance; in order to meet their workload demands, their psychological and physical wellbeing is compromised. Despite the long hours at school, work encroaches on the ECTs' home life. Home may be their physical retreat, but not their psychological escape. Home is also where family and friends are. For ECTs originally from the country, home is where they've established roots in the RRR area. For most ECTs from the city, despite RRR relationships and connections with their school context and community, home is in the city where their connections with family and friends remain.

Resilience emerges from "successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands" (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 1). Findings highlight that despite experiencing challenges, such as entering a new profession and, for some, relocating to a new and unfamiliar environment (surviving), ECTs shared of their personal and professional wellbeing, growth, and development, as well as their rewarding experiences of teaching in RRR Australia (thriving and flourishing). Although three of the six ECTs intend to leave RRR teaching for a city-based position, all ECTs spoke of the personal and professional benefits of working and living in RRR Australia and encourage other ECTs to embrace the opportunity.

ECTs' experiences of work and life in RRR Australia has all the essential elements of a story: the characters (microsystem), the plot (mesosystem), the setting (exosystem and chronosystem), the theme (macrosystem), and the conflict (influences of the interactions). To answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?,* the overarching themes within each and across all ECTs' RRR experiences are now organised through the bioecological theory and the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Applying this theoretical framework, and connecting it to the wellbeing conceptual framework, allows the ECTs' RRR experiences to be explored and understood from the personal to the wider context, with the bidirectional and reciprocal interactions, or proximal processes, over the course of a school year (time) (Figure 18). With ECTs centred as the 'person', this model provides an holistic and multifaceted approach to understand the factors that influenced ECTs' RRR experiences across various systems.

Figure 18: Factors that influence the work and life of early career teachers in rural, regional, and remote Australia.
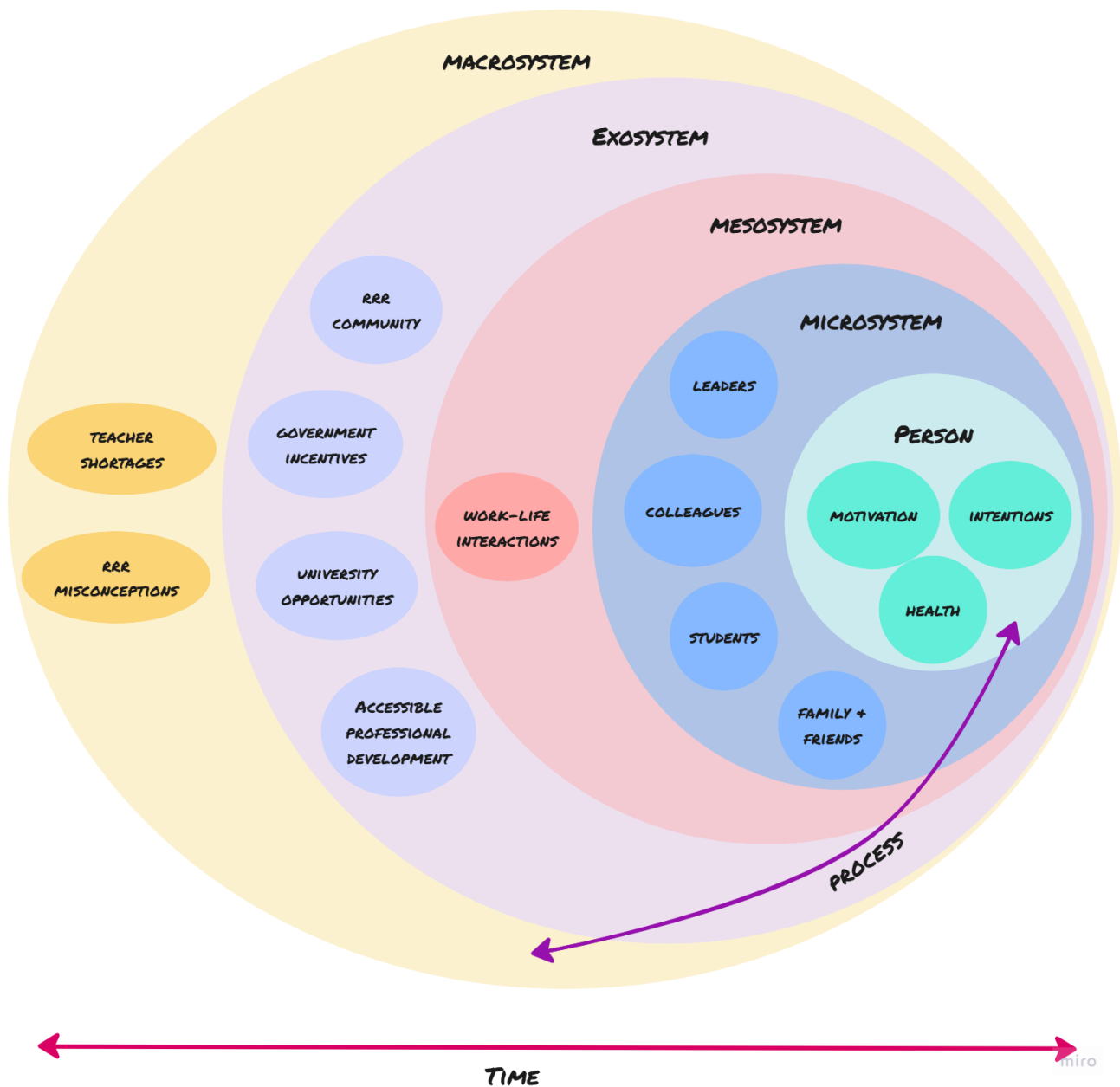
The ECTs' proximal processes (or bidirectional and reciprocal interactions), their personal characteristics (dispositions and resources), contextual factors, and the timing of experiences shape their development, wellbeing, and experiences in RRR Australia. Findings from this research revealed that various factors influenced the ECTs' experiences of work and life in RRR Australia, enabling some ECTs to thrive and flourish, while others experience challenges and survive.

Although ECTs are active agents, their personal biopsychological characteristics influence their RRR experiences, such as their motivation to work and live in RRR areas, their physical and psychological health and wellbeing, and their intentions to remain or leave the RRR area after a year of teaching. However, these personal characteristics aren't solely responsible for influencing ECTs' RRR experiences; the nested system of different yet interrelated contexts are also important. In their microsystem, ECTs engage in sustained, reciprocal interactions, or proximal processes, with individuals within their immediate environments, such as their RRR school leaders, colleagues, and students, and their city or RRR-based family and friends. ECTs' mesosystem comprises of the bidirectional interactions between their RRR work and home life that influence their experiences during a school year. Broader contexts indirectly influence the ECTs' RRR experiences, such as the opportunities offered by their universities, access to professional learning (PL), their interactions with the RRR community, and the government incentives that attracted, retained, and sustained them. For ECTs, their RRR experiences were influenced by their macrosystem, encompassing the ongoing RRR teacher shortage and RRR misconceptions.

Due to the bidirectional and reciprocal nature of ECTs' interactions (proximal processes) with their RRR contexts, there is continual flux between their nested systems. For example, government incentives (exosystem), such as a $5000 salary bonus (The Educator, 2022), aim to mitigate the current teacher shortage (macrosystem and time). The lack of RRR teaching staff affects the ECTs' work-life balance (mesosystem) due to teaching out-of-field and additional work demands to fill the gap; this leads to struggles in both the ECTs' physical and psychological wellbeing (person) and quality time with family and friends (microsystem and time).

Framed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and drawing connections to the wellbeing conceptual framework, the following discussion will explore the person and context factors that influenced ECTs working and living in RRR Australia, with proximal processes and time interwoven throughout. It is important to note that the interactions and flux between the nested systems of influence occurs differently depending on the RRR context, the ECT, and the timing of experiences. The following discussion presents the interpretation and analysis of the research findings and pose suggestions for each level of the model: personal characteristics, microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem and macrosystem influences on RRR ECTs' work and life.

6.2 Influence of personal characteristics

The following sections will highlight the person level factors that emerged from the research findings. These included the ECTs' different motivations to teach in RRR schools, their physical and psychological health and wellbeing, and their intentions to remain or leave the RRR area after a year of teaching.

6.2.1 Motivations to go country

Personal and micro- and exosystemic factors influence ECTs motivation to work in RRR Australia. At a personal level, three career changing ECTs decision to teach in RRR areas was driven by serving a greater purpose than one's own desires: to help the disadvantaged and make a difference for students. Their sense of meaning and purpose, by contributing to society, is strongly linked to one's wellbeing, efficacy, and self-worth (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005). Although Williams and Forgasz's (2009) study focused on Australian career change PSTs, their findings showed these career changers had strong, sustained intrinsic motivation to teach.

ECTs' immediate microsystem was taken into consideration when deciding to work in RRR areas. All but one of the ECTs in this research had a partner/husband/wife and were willing to move with the ECTs to the country. These relationships encouraged the RRR relocation, but were also essential sources of personal support for these ECTs, and can enhance their general wellbeing (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014). For city-born Charlie, single and child-free, relocating for RRR work was perceived as an opportunity to leave home. It appears that, in order to professionally and personally grow, Charlie needed to disconnect from his home. These findings support previous research that one's partner's employment situation, family circumstances, prior connections and experiences, and/or a preference to live in RRR areas are all influential factors for the decision to live and work in RRR areas (Campbell & Yates, 2011; Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Downes & Roberts, 2017b; Handal et al., 2018; Hazel & McCallum, 2016; Lyons, 2009; Lyons et al., 2006). An important finding is the financial setback a teaching career would cost ECTs with families. This accords with findings from Goss et al.'s (2019) study who reported that "recent increases to teacher pay have not kept pace with other professions" (p. 28) therefore it's challenging to attract quality teachers if they "know that the pay isn't great in teaching" (p. 20). Although the government provides financial incentives for relocating and teaching in RRR areas, it appears that teaching in RRR areas is a long-term financial cost for ECTs with families. Perhaps governments could be more responsive to increasing the salary of the teaching profession. This may attract potential

candidates to the profession if teachers' salaries are as competitive as other careers options, as well as benefiting in-service teachers.

However, Halsey (2018a) highlighted that "very little is apparently done to assist partners and families, where involved, with making the transition and adapting to different circumstances including finding employment and making education arrangements for children" (p. 41). Governments and schools could consider how they could attract and support the family and partners of ECTs in their relocation and transition to RRR areas. This might include assistance in finding suitable housing, offering job prospects for partners/husbands/wives, support with enrolling ECTs' children into schools. Furthermore, findings from this research indicate that ECTs with RRR background/experience are more likely to undertake RRR teaching (Campbell & Yates, 2011; Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Lyons, 2009), it is advised that governments, universities, and schools inspire RRR school students and residents to undertake an education degree; this will be discussed later in this chapter.

School employers and governments, the ECTs' exosystem, also indirectly influences their motivations and decisions of working in RRR areas. Securing a teaching position is an important factor for ECTs in this research, especially as RRR areas were perceived as easier to gain employment. These findings are consistent with previous research that gaining employment and job availability are common motivations that attract ECTs to RRR areas (Country Education Partnership, 2021; Hazel & McCallum, 2016; Lyons, 2009; Mansfield & Beltman, 2014). Interestingly, permanency is one government incentive that persuades ECTs to work in RRR areas. Comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that securing a permanent teaching position is another influential factor that attracts teachers to work in RRR areas (Country Education Partnership, 2021; Handal et al., 2018; Mansfield & Beltman, 2014). It is suggested that RRR school employers and governments better promote the employment opportunities available in these areas and continue to offer permanency to secure ECTs into their teaching positions.

Overall, these findings provide an understanding of the factors that shape ECTs' motivations and decisions to work in RRR areas. Their stories suggest that the personal motivations and micro- and exosystemic factors may influence potential PSTs, graduate teachers, and in-service teachers, as well as city and county-born teachers, to take the initial step into a RRR teaching career.

6.2.2 Putting health and wellbeing second

Teacher wellbeing encompasses the psychological capacity for teachers to manage normal stressors within the profession (Falecki & Mann, 2021). Findings from this research reveal the physical and psychological impact on ECTs working and living in RRR Australia. ECTs prioritise and invest in their new profession, rather than in their own health and wellbeing. These findings are supported by previous research that physical and psychological health can be jeopardised the demands of teaching and the insufficient available time to devote to healthy eating and exercise (McCallum & Price, 2010). Despite the physical and psychological challenges, ECTs in this research understand the importance of supporting and maintaining their health and that changes are needed to sustain it.

Findings from this research highlight the ECTs' strategies to replenish their physical and psychological resources. Time and effort help ECTs manage their physical health. Changes to their diet, such as meal preparation to ensure a prepacked recess and lunch, helps with healthy eating at school. Joining the gym, group fitness classes, walking, running, and yoga are ways ECTs can recharge. Scheduling time to support one's health and wellbeing mustn't be perceived as an indulgence, but an investment. These findings reflect those of Hine et al.'s (2022) who also found that an "individuals' own efforts and actions" influenced teacher wellbeing, as well as emphasising:

> the importance of caring for one's holistic health needs with sleep, nutrition, social connectedness and respite, and mindfulness being mentioned. Educators recognized that these key factors made a difference to their ability to effectively function in their roles, obtain enjoyment in life and manage stress. (p. 9)

To support her wellbeing, one remote ECT need to forward plan her antidepressant medication as there wasn't a pharmacy in her RRR area. Inaccessibility to essential resources for supporting one's mental health and wellbeing is of concern. This also connects with Hine et al.'s (2022) findings that highlighted "a lack of locally accessible health service options was raised as an additional barrier affecting educators based in rural and remote locations" (p. 5).

To better support ECTs' physical and psychological health and wellbeing, governments could advocate for legislation that prioritises teacher health and wellbeing, including the funding for mental health resources in schools and endorsing work policies that focus on the underlying factors that contribute to compromised wellbeing (e.g. manageable class sizes, reasonable workloads, and adequate planning time, reducing administrative tasks). A positive step has been the government's recent 'Right to Disconnect' law allows teachers " the right to refuse to monitor,

read or respond to contact (or attempted contact) outside their working hours" (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.); this could help teachers to switch-off after school hours. Policies must ensure that teachers have access to mental health support services, such as counselling or wellness programs, even if these are not directly available in the RRR area. RRR schools, its leaders, and colleagues play a crucial role in cultivating a positive school culture that prioritises wellbeing through wellbeing initiatives, open communication with leadership regarding workload concerns and stress levels, and regular check-ins and support systems for teachers, especially during high-stress periods (the start of the school year, report writing, parent-teacher interviews etc.). RRR communities can provide additional support by facilitating connections with local health resources, such as counselling services or fitness programs, that teachers can access outside of school. ECTs need to reflect on their self-care practises, particularly during times when work demands become overwhelming. They can source external providers or services that offer information, resources, and strategies for improving their physical and psychological wellbeing and equipping them with the skills needed to adapt to challenges in their work and life.

Overall, these stories offer insight into the ECTs' personal characteristics, such as their physical and psychological resources and dispositions, that influence their interactions and experiences of work and life in RRR areas.

6.2.3 Do I want to remain country?

Toward the end of the school year, ECTs were asked whether they intend to remain working and living in RRR Australia. Findings from this research highlight the different micro-, exo-, and macrosystemic factors influencing the ECTs' person level decisions to stay or leave their RRR context.

Country-born ECTs insist they will continue to work and live in the country. There is a sense of returning home to their roots in the country; at a macro level there is a connection to the RRR way of life, and at the microsystem level are the relationships with family and friends. At a personal level, it appeared that Edward was still pursuing a sense of purpose and meaning in this life which may have motivated him to resign from his permanent RRR teaching position and accept a temporary contract to work with RRR trauma low SES students to "make things better for them." This connects with previous research in which ECTs and experienced teachers with RRR backgrounds, experiences, and connections are motivated to remain in RRR teaching (Handal et al., 2018; Hazel & McCallum, 2016; Lyons, 2009). These findings suggest that governments, universities, and schools should consider targeting potential teacher candidates in RRR areas.

Other Australian states could apply a similar approach to the N.S.W. Government's 'Grow Your Own' programs which are teacher training pathways for non-teaching school staff and community members to teach in RRR New South Wales (NSW) areas (NSW Government, 2024). Universities and governments could better promote and expand the opportunities for potential RRR candidates to undertake ITE programs in their nearby communities through regional hubs or online programs. "Regional University Study Hubs help students in regional and remote areas access higher education without having to leave their community. They provide student support and campus-style facilities for students who study online" (Department of Education, n.d.).

City-born Bridget intends to remain working and living in her RRR area as the lifestyle was rewarding. This finding is supported by previous research that enjoyment of the lifestyle and natural environment were factors influencing teachers to remain in RRR areas (Lock et al., 2012; Lyons, 2009; Lyons et al., 2006). ECTs in this research advised that governments, universities, and schools better showcase the landscape and lifestyle of the RRR Australia to motivate PSTs, ECTs, and experienced teachers to consider a tree or sea change and relocate to RRR areas. One way to achieve this by inviting PSTs and in-service teachers to share their positive experiences, the quality of lifestyle, and the available opportunities of living and working in RRR Australia.

For three of the city-born ECTs, their family microsystem appears to be a factor that influences their return to the city. Although the city-born ECTs fostered relationships with students, colleagues, and school in their RRR school microsystem, three of them intend to leave their RRR work and life and return to city teaching to be closer to their relationships at home; a crucial source of support for ECTs' wellbeing. This aligns with previous research that displacement from their 'home' can be a significant professional and personal issue confronting ECTs who are "living across two very different worlds" (Buchanan et al., 2013; Lock et al., 2012, p. 124). From these findings, governments could review their one-size-fits-all approach to incentives and consider a tailored, flexible, and bundled suite of incentives that could cater to the diverse stages of teachers' careers and their personal needs and circumstances (Beswick et al., 2023; Burke & Buchanan, 2022; Lyons, 2009; White, 2019). Governments could expand the current the RRR travel allowance so family and friends can travel to and from the RRR area. This could involve a re-envisioning of the tourism vouchers offered during the COVID-19 pandemic, which promoted domestic tourism and provided an economic stimulus to the regional hospitality and entertainment, could support the RRR travel and accommodation for ECTs' family and friends. Inviting and sharing the RRR experience with their loved ones may better support the ECTs by having a little piece of home with them, but also boost spending within the RRR community.

Family also factors in to Fleur's intentions to return back to the city as she would like her children to "attend a regular high school." This could imply that macrosystemic misconception of RRR education being inadequate compared to a regular city school has shaped Fleur's perceptions. This finding is supported by Lyons et al.'s (2006) findings that most teachers chose to leave RRR schools to improve their own children's educational prospects, creating "a compounding and self-perpetuating effect" (p. 18) that the quality of RRR education is insufficient. These findings suggest that media campaigns could promote the educational opportunities and achievements of RRR schooling. Advertising could focus on the benefits rather than shortcomings, such as: highlighting university and industry connections and pathways, curriculum equity and opportunities comparable to the city, the targeted investment of funding for improvements to school infrastructure, resources, and technology, as well as sharing data on RRR schools' academic achievements, university acceptance rates, and post-school successes. Changing the narrative around RRR education could help the public perceive it as a viable, competitive alternative to city education.

Although, securing a permanent teaching position influences these ECTs to work in RRR areas, the government incentive of permanency often guarantees the 'right to return' to a city teaching position after completing a minimum period of RRR teaching experience. Findings from this research reveal that city-born ECTs choose to gain permanency and teaching experience before returning "home" to the city. This accords with previous research which found that ECTs perceive their "country service…their two-year 'tour of duty'…hardship duty…a career stepping-stone" (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2004, p. 3) as "a good place for a teacher to start their career but not to devote their career to" (Halsey, 2018a, p. 38). It is advised that governments revise their permanency and right to return incentives to retain teachers, perhaps offering teachers the right to return to a city teaching position after completing over 5 years of their RRR bonded teaching position.

ECTs' stories highlight the complex interplay between micro-, exo-, and macrosystemic factors that influence their person level intentions to remain or leave their RRR work and life. It appears that 'home is where the heart is' for these ECTs; country-born ECTs felt at home in the country with their established roots in the RRR area, and for most city-born ECTs, home was the city, where their connections endured, compelling their return. One city-born ECT made their RRR area their home. Similarly to the motivations for working and living in RRR areas, these findings offer insight for stakeholders into the personal intentions and contextual factors that influence city and county-born ECTs to stay or leave their RRR area.

Summary. This chapter section highlights the ECTs' person characteristics and bidirectional interactions of contextual factors that influence their motivations and future intentions for RRR teaching, as well as their physical and psychological health and wellbeing during their year of working and living in RRR areas. The section that follows will explore the microsystemic factors that influence ECTs' work and life in RRR Australia.

6.3 Microsystem influences

The following sections will highlight the microsystemic factors that emerged from the research findings. These include the reciprocal interactions of RRR school leaders, colleagues, and students, as well as ECTs' family and friends, and their influence on ECTs' work and life in RRR Australia.

6.3.1 Qualities of a leader

In their work microsystem, interactions with RRR school leaders (i.e., Principals, Deputy Principals, Heads of Campus, Faculty Heads) both professionally and personally support the ECTs in this research. An interesting finding from this research is how ECTs describe the dispositions and resources of supportive, "high quality" (Charlie) leaders during challenging moments. This accords with Peters and Pearce's (2012) findings that when leaders provide quality personal support and invest in their welfare and development, ECT resilience improves. Charlie expressed his loyalty and indebtedness for his leader's psychological and professional support; concerningly, he also divulged that he would have quit teaching and not remained at the school without the support of his school leader. These findings align with previous studies that showed strong leaders, whose relationships provide professional and personal support, can enhance ECTs' experiences and potential challenges of RRR work, as well as play a crucial role in attracting, recruiting, and retaining of teachers to RRR schools (Crosswell et al., 2018; Mason & Matas, 2015; Peters & Pearce, 2012; Reid et al., 2012). It appears that leadership qualities of care, non-judgemental, patience, and holistic support influenced the interactions of these RRR ECTs' development and experiences.

However, interactions and experiences with leadership could be a barrier to ECTs' development and experiences. ECTs on contract or casual employment perceived a pressure to say yes to offered opportunities as refusal may jeopardise chances of future employment. There appears a paradox between showing one's eagerness and willingness to remain at a school by volunteering and saying yes to the offered opportunities, and jeopardising one's teaching prospects

and compromising one's wellbeing by taking on too much. Similar findings have noted that temporary contract teachers, especially ECTs, feel impermanence, silenced, and marginalised; they dare not ask questions or clarify concerns; they cannot say no, but must say yes to offers presented to them or "they will soon be out the door" (Kelly et al., 2018, p. 309). Bridget felt stressed, undervalued, expendable, and silenced as a temporary contract teacher when her school executive didn't communicate changes to her employment. Stacey et al.'s (2022) research found that temporary or contract teachers felt they worked harder and increased their workload to 'prove themselves' to the school's leadership, more than those in permanent positions.

Overall, these stories highlight the importance that ECTs' place on their interactions with leaders in their RRR school microsystem, especially the professional and personal support they can provide, but also the direct and indirect impact their actions can have on ECTs' experiences and wellbeing at work. Leaders "light the fire, then fan the flames" (Thiele et al., 2023, p. 12), therefore RRR school leaders (i.e., Principals, Deputy Principals, Heads of Campus, Faculty Heads) interactions with ECTs should involve regular check-ins and open-door policies to encourage communication and approachability, and ongoing support and responsiveness to challenging circumstances which ECTs may experience when navigating their new RRR work and life. Additionally, school leaders need to be made aware of the person-level or individual dispositions and resources that ECTs appreciate and value in a leader, such as their empathy, non-judgement, and patience.

6.3.2 Collegial culture

Findings from this research illuminate the positive influence of supportive collegial interactions within the ECTs' RRR school microsystem. Linked to Bronfenbrenner's personal resources, ECTs' in this research appreciate when colleagues recognised the abilities, knowledge, and experience they bring to their work leading to feelings of competency, respect, and a sense of expertise. This reflects White et al.'s (2009) research into beginning rural teachers, who "were not treated as novices, nor were they viewed from a deficit perceptive in that their skills and knowledge were highly valued and utilised by the staff" (p. 7). Findings from this research also highlighted how positive interactions with their colleagues made ECTs feel a sense of "finding a place" or belonging, of fitting in, and of sitting "on the same page" (Daisy). This accords with Hazel and McCallum's (2016) findings that RRR ECTs are grateful when working with 'like-minded' colleagues.

Debriefing with colleagues serves as both a reflective practise and an emotional release for these ECTs. These interactions were particularly valuable for Ava, confiding and sharing in their struggles and exhaustion, their little wins and moments of pride. These findings suggest a bidirectional reciprocity and trust as Ava and her colleagues shared and reflected on their experiences of their work, supporting their professional wellbeing. The reciprocal interactions reaffirmed in Ava that she was not alone in her challenges, expressing "It's not just me. Everybody else is going through this as well". These findings are consistent with Hazel and McCallum's (2016) findings that the personal and professional support from colleagues can influence ECTs' successful transition into, and coping with the demands of, working in rural areas, as well as fostering a sense of belonging. A striking comment came from Charlie, who described his collegial culture as a "fraternity", implying a comradery among staff and a sense of togetherness, otherwise "everyone will crash and burn" suggesting the fraternity will crumble if not in solidarity. Lock et al.'s (2012) study reported similar findings of the supportive RRR collegial "team spirit…and the need to 'pull together' to survive both professionally and personally" (p. 130).

Findings from this research indicate that RRR schools create a collegial culture by providing regular, ongoing opportunities for their ECTs to socially interact and professionally collaborate with colleagues. Furthermore, governments could provide funding and encourage RRR schools to form PLCs or networks to foster connections and develop and share pedagogical knowledge among all teachers, especially ECTs new to the area.

Interactions with Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) and local elders in her remote context are of importance for Fleur. She felt "it was a gift" when AIEO's and local elders shared traditional knowledge and cultural practices and appreciated their presence and support both in the classroom and in the bush. Building better relationships, school roles, and collaboration with Aboriginal Education Workers' (AEWs) could be beneficial as they provide invaluable support to teachers and schools. This could be achieved by ITE programs and schools developing PSTs' and ECTs' intercultural knowledge and understanding of the important role of AIEOs, AEWs, and local elders play in supporting students.

Findings from this research also capture how interactions with mentors both professionally and personally supported the ECTs in their RRR work. Mentors provided "moments of support" (Ava) in professionally guiding ECTs with planning, grading, and reporting; modelling of lessons; sharing resources; answering their questions; and becoming a sounding board for ideas. Mentor interactions were a source of personal support at work; Edward's mentor checked in and was

available to talk, Ava felt understood by her mentor, who showed sincere interest and care, someone she could go to no matter what. These positive mentor interactions provide RRR ECTs with "a shoulder to lean on" (Country Education Partnership, 2021, p. 22) and holistically support them in their professional development and personal wellbeing (Buchanan et al., 2013; Goodwin et al., 2023).

Ava offers important insight into the dispositions and resources that ECTs value in a mentor. She shares the essential and ineffective dispositions and resources of a mentor, but also the professional psychological support they can provide. A mentor who is not cynical or disliking the profession, but one who motivates, loves teaching, and develops a positive resilient mentality when times are tough and overwhelming. ECTs from this study imply that the allocation of mentors appears to be either a formal or haphazard process. Ava's school had a mentor system, yet Bridget's designated mentor fell "by default to the head teacher, but a lot of times the head teacher is so busy." This connects with previous studies which suggest the consistency and quality of mentors can vary; some may be "demoralised, burnt-out, or not possessing the requisite skill" (Lampert et al., 2021, p. 64) or "too busy or stressed to provide needed support" (Shields & Kilgour, 2018, p. 34). Mansfield et al.'s (2014) emphasised that "what is important is not simply having a mentor, but the quality of that relationship" (p. 561).

Interestingly, not one of the ECTs mention experiencing an induction process at their RRR school. Sullivan et al. (2022) stated that induction, mentoring, and ongoing support are essential for ECTs' transition into the profession. It would be beneficial to train mentors to develop their instructional support for their engagement with ECTs. RRR should could formalise an induction and mentoring program; this may help to orientate ECTs into the RRR school and transition into the profession, ensure ongoing support for ECTs and experienced teachers who are new to working in RRR areas, and allocating trained mentors to ECTs and schedule ongoing time to collaborate, create, plan, and moderate curricula and teaching resources. These stories suggest that colleagues are essential professional and personal support in the development, experiences, and wellbeing of ECTs.

6.3.3 Relationships with my students

Another microsystem that influences ECTs' experiences and development are the interactions with their RRR students. ECTs in this research place great importance on student relationships and express the happiness and pride they feel when supporting RRR students' learning and seeing the impacts of their teaching. This accords with Hine et al.'s (2022) findings

that relationships with students are a significant source of enjoyment and satisfaction for teachers. ECTs find meaning in building the teacher-student relationship, which corroborates the research from Turner and Thielking (2019, 2020), who reported that teachers found more meaning in fostering positive teacher-student relationships and creating profound, engaging learning experiences, and were less focused on the curriculum requirements.

Students' little moments of triumph reinforce ECTs' self-efficacy in their teaching practice; when students achieve success, ECTs feel successful. George et al.'s (2018) research of ECTs' self-efficacy showed that as experiences of mastery and success increases, ECTs' feelings of self-efficacy also increases. Daisy and Edward felt pleasure and reward when their students, who were struggling with their learning, had a 'lightbulb moment' in their understanding. These experiences reflect Turner and Thielking's (2020) findings that Australian teachers found their work meaningful when they had a positive impact on students' lives.

The bidirectional and reciprocal nature of teacher-student interactions can also influence student engagement with their learning. When Bridget's students knew that she cared about their learning, "they go the extra mile", suggesting that students would increase their effort and try harder when ECTs made them feel supported. This finding reflects previous studies which showed that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with better student engagement and academic development (Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023; Martin & Collie, 2019; Quin, 2017).

An intriguing comment came from city-born Bridget, who stated that her students knew she liked them and "You are not just there because you have to be." A possible explanation for this might be that the students, directly or indirectly, 'pick up' on messages which teachers emanate about their permanence in the RRR school. The lack of continuity and transient of teachers in RRR areas, "'who is an insider, who is an outsider', or who is a 'local' and who is a 'blow in'" (Halsey, 2018a, p. 18) can affect students' learning and success (Howard et al., 2021).

Teachers "can't get anywhere without that relationship" (Ava) with students. Hogan and White's (2021) findings highlighted that ECTs' investment in teacher-student relationships supported their wellbeing. The reciprocity in student-teacher relationships appears important to the experiences, development, and wellbeing of ECTs and their students. RRR schools can invest in opportunities for ECTs to build and nurture student relationships, as well as offer professional support and/or development to improve relational pedagogy.

6.3.4 Relationships matter more

Interactions with family, partners, husbands/wives, and friends are important microsystems for RRR ECTs. Findings from this research reveal that their family and friends are crucial sources of support for their work and life in RRR areas.

Family is a supportive influence on the wellbeing of the ECTs in this research. They can present a different perspective, offer advice, be a sounding board, and recognise when ECTs are stressed and need care. Furthermore, connections with friends are also a source of support for ECTs in RRR areas, depended upon for their health and happiness, and acting like 'family'. These findings accord with previous research that friends and family are essential for ECTs' social and emotional support and wellbeing (Le Cornu, 2013; McCallum & Price, 2010).

Interestingly, findings from this research highlight the bidirectional nature of the family and ECT interactions. ECTs ensured their family was supported and coping in their new RRR surroundings as "their wellbeing affects my wellbeing" (Fleur). Partners, husbands, and wives also need to disconnect from the 'teacher talk' at home so they don't feel like a "pseudo teacher" (Daisy). Teachers and their work don't end when the final bell rings, it encroaches on ECTs' home life. Ava experienced internal conflict balancing the big commitment of the teaching profession and struggling to make her relationship with her partner matter more. This finding broadly supports Hine et al.'s (2022) findings that teachers' workload "ate into educators' personal time...this created significant amounts of guilt, with family responsibilities competing for time and energy" (p. 6). For city-born ECTs, school holidays offers an opportunity to return home and reconnect with their family and friends. This finding links with Sharplin et al.'s (2011) findings that holidays allowed RRR teachers to take "time out from the job and job location" (p. 143) and for "regenerating personal batteries" (p. 144). Previous research highlights that the support from family and friends can help RRR ECTs' cope with their isolation (Crosswell et al., 2018; Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). Although ECTs perceive the holidays as a time to reconnect with family, the act of counting down the days until the break could send the message that teaching is about survival, a sentence to be endured until one's release or escape.

To better support ECTs, one suggestion is for the government to expand the RRR travel allowance or a re-envisioning of the tourism vouchers, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Lock et al. (2012) found that RRR teachers' feelings of isolation was reduced when guests came to visit, some guests planned a follow-up trip, and others were reassured of the younger teachers' safety and happiness. Governments must continue proving travel incentives for RRR teachers to visit

their family and friends when they are requiring support. Perhaps RRR communities, school leaders, and colleagues could create social opportunities for ECTs to foster friendships, networking, and connections within their RRR area.

Overall, these stories emphasise the importance of ECTs' interactions with family, partners, husbands/wives, and friends as they provide crucial sources of support for ECTs' work and life in RRR areas.

Summary. This chapter section highlights the reciprocal interactions of RRR school leaders, colleagues, and students, as well as ECTs' family and friends, and their influence on ECTs' work and life in RRR Australia. The section that follows will explore the mesosystemic factors that influence ECTs' work and life in RRR Australia.

6.4 Mesosystem influences

The following section will highlight the mesosystemic factors that emerges from the research findings. These include the bidirectional interactions between ECTs' work and home life and its influence on their experiences in RRR Australia.

6.4.1 A new teacher, a grad teacher

For ECTs, their personal characteristics, such as resources and dispositions, interact with their RRR work and life mesosystems and influence ECTs' experiences and development. The realities of teaching begins when a graduate teacher enters their own classroom for their first lesson (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Peters & Le Cornu, 2006). ECTs in this research find RRR teaching and work to be a "hard" (Edward and Charlie), "intense" (Ava), "rough, rocky" (Daisy), "stressful" (Bridget and Daisy), "tough" (Ava and Daisy), and a "shock" (Ava and Fleur). Hazel and McCallum (2016) noted similar findings in which ECTs found their first year of rural teaching both challenging and complex. One ECT, a career changer, describes the teaching profession as all-encompassing as it can be "a 24 hour a day seven day a week job" (Daisy). It appears that ECTs perceive the intensity of their work as the norm, the expectation, and the reality.

ECTs from this research describe the demanding nature of the workload, referring to the additional administrative demands as ridiculous extra 'stuff' that is new, scary, and time consuming, as well as "hindering some teachers from being more successful in their jobs" (Bridget). These findings highlight how the burden of exosystemic compliance is affecting ECTs and hindering them from

focusing on their teaching and student learning. Similarly, Hunter and Sonnemann (2022b) highlighted that Australian teachers felt:

> too stretched to do everything we ask of them… asked to take on too great a workload; and administrative requirements are too onerous…teachers are struggling to complete core aspects of their role, but it is not for a lack of effort or dedication…numerous barriers limit the time they have to prepare for class…If teachers are not well prepared, student learning suffers. (pp. 3-16)

Teachers' work is increasing with competing priorities on a teacher's time; not meeting the demands can lead to work encroaching on ECT's home life. ECTs either remain at school until the schoolwork is completed or bring schoolwork home, which can take its toll on spending their time with family and friends. ECTs understand that the work demands of the teaching profession is an immense commitment and obligation.

Balancing the work demands also influence ECTs' individual resources and dispositions. Their physical and psychological wellbeing can be compromised as ECTs experience exhaustion, weariness, and unhappiness in their full-time teaching work; some felt mentally, physically, intellectually, and emotionally drained. This aligns with previous studies, which showed that when ECTs are overwhelmed and exhausted by the intense workload demands, it leaves few opportunities to rest, relax, and recharge during term time, but leads to feeling burned out by the end of term (Hogan & White, 2021; Hunter & Sonnemann, 2022b). Furthermore, Carroll et al.'s (2022) findings warned that "both early career and rural/remote teachers appear to be at greater risk of stress and burnout" (p. 462), with heighted stress levels in ECTs affecting their retention in the profession.

To manage their work/life balance, ECTs recognise that they need to set boundaries, consciously decide not to bring too much work home, and achieve realistic timeframes of working. This finding is consistent with that of Hogan and White (2021) who found that ECTs understood the boundaries and responsibilities of a teacher and their own susceptibility to burnout.

It is essential that, at the exosystem level, government and schools rethink and improve the current working conditions and workload policies for ECTs. Stakeholders could talk with ECTs about the nuances and complexities of what their work requires and ask ECTs for possible solutions to improve their workload demands, such as support for non-teaching duties, reducing administrative tasks, covering yard duties and extracurricular activities. To develop and build ECTs' resources and dispositions at the person level, PD or PL could provide knowledge and skills with

ongoing guidance and support from leaders and colleagues as ECTs navigate, cope, and learn to balance their mesosystemic work-life demands and survive their day-to-day responsibilities.

An interesting finding from this research is Edward's experience of out-of-field teaching. Out of his comfort zone and feeling like a fool, Edward appears to lack self-efficacy in his ability to deliver English content . Unfortunately, RRR schools often struggle to attract and recruit specialised subject teachers, especially due to teacher shortages (Carroll et al., 2022; Weldon, 2016). Edward's experience is consistent with previous research in which it often falls upon ECTs, especially in RRR schools, to teach outside of their specialised subject, or out-of-field, rather than their experienced colleagues (AITSL, 2021; Weldon, 2016). To reduce teaching outside of their subject specialisation, schools should be transparent regarding the teaching position when they advertise, interview, recruit, and timetable the curriculum areas for ECTs, as well as engaging in conversations with ECTs to work with their strengths and expertise.

Across the year and with increasing experience, ECTs notice their teaching practise grow, building their self-efficacy and pride as a teacher. In particular, Ava demonstrated the "resilience factor" (Ewing & Manuel, 2005) when she tried new things and made mistakes yet persevered, understanding that her teaching practice will require continual refinement and work. With time and experience, teaching and work became easier and less new. These findings connect with Ewing and Manuel's (2005) study which found positive teaching experiences helped develop ECTs' confidence in using effective strategies and refining their teaching pedagogy. As they develop, ECTs' "journey towards their own truths about the who, how, what and why of teaching" (Ewing & Manuel, 2005, p. 11). When ECTs in this research are given opportunities to reflect on their teaching experiences, they feel pride, love, and positivity about being a teacher. Leaders and colleagues can engage with and support ECTs' reflective practise through mentoring discussions and meetings, and acknowledge and show appreciation for the work ECTs do to reinforce their growth, wellbeing, and development as a teacher.

6.5 Exosystem and macrosystem influences

The following sections will highlight the exosystemic and macrosystemic factors that emerge from the research findings. These include the university opportunities, government incentives, and interactions with the community that influence ECTs' work and life in RRR Australia.

6.5.1 Help early career teachers to be supported

Findings from this research emphasise the university and government opportunities and incentives that ECTs appreciate, however, ECTs offer suggestions for areas that could be improved.

Teacher shortages and issues attracting teachers to RRR areas affected the ECTs. These challenges ranged from struggling to replace a teacher who suddenly left, no applicants for advertised teaching positions, filling positions with untrained staff, and collapsing classes due to a lack of teachers to cover the classes. These findings resonate with previous research concerning the ongoing issue of attracting, recruiting, and retaining teachers in RRR areas which is further exacerbated by the national teacher shortage (Halsey, 2018a; The Productivity Commission, 2023; White, 2019). To attract teachers to the profession and to RRR areas, ECTs stress the importance of exposing pre-service, early career, and experienced teachers to RRR experiences.

Universities play an important role in inspiring teachers to work in RRR areas. ECTs suggest that universities encourage PSTs from city universities to either undertake a RRR practicum placement and/or study at regional universities, opportunities these ECTs experienced. This finding reflects those of Lock et al. (2012) who found that RRR practicum experience inspired teachers to commence RRR teaching. For some ECTs, undertaking an ITE program at a regional university created connections with the schools and led to a teaching position. This finding broadly supports Hudson and Hudson's (2019) study of a school-university collaboration that provided PSTs with a sponsored RRR practicum while completing their ITE program at the regional university. Their findings indicated that four of the five PSTs accepted teaching positions at their RRR practicum school. Personal and financial circumstances can make RRR practicums challenging for PSTs who have families, work commitments while studying, or live in cities. Edward found it difficult to leave his family in the city, away from his home, during his rural practicum as a PST. The issue of unpaid teaching placements has been recently addressed by the Australian Government, who announced that from July 2025 PSTs facing the greatest financial hardship can access $319.50 per week while undertaking their placement (Department of Education, 2024). Critics find this payment a "slap in the face" as it equates to "roughly $8 an hour…well below the legally mandated minimum wage of $23.23 an hour, or $882 a week" (Devine, 2024, p. 1). ECTs suggest that governments and universities offer a "fee reduction" (Bridget) or "wipe off the HECS debt would be great" (Fleur) for a commitment to RRR teaching. Suggestions from ECTs in this research include a compulsory RRR practicum in ITE programs, with sponsorship and/or financial assistance (reimbursement or scholarships), to expose PSTs to these areas with the aim of

encouraging future employment in the region. ECTs advise universities to invite guest speakers to highlight the benefits, opportunities, and positive experiences of the teaching profession, especially ECT alumni, who have enjoyed and remained teaching and living in RRR Australia.

To attract and recruit teachers to RRR areas, the government offers incentives such as relocation assistance, subsidised costs, financial allowances, additional PL, career progression, and guaranteed return from the country. Although the RRR-born ECTs didn't mention any incentives, for the city-born ECTs relocating to the RRR area, rent reductions, renting government housing, and locality and travel allowances were beneficial. Fleur faced difficulties as her "accommodation wasn't ready until week seven" of Term 1 so she and her family temporarily moved into the principal's house; this was stressful for the family and affected Fleur's wellbeing. This resonates with Halsey's (2018a) findings, noting that:

> when appointments require leaving present living arrangements, packing and travelling long distances, and negotiating and moving into 'new' accommodation and, in some instances shared accommodation, pressures generated by the changes can also have a significant impact on partners and families if they are involved. (p. 49)

Despite receiving government housing, those moving from home for the first time face financial stress due to the additional expenses of purchasing items to furnish their house; this is an economic issue faced by ECTs who are relocating to RRR areas with little money (Hazel & McCallum, 2016; Lock et al., 2012). Other incentives of which city-born ECTs took advantage are gaining permanency and the right-to-return "home" to the city, as discussed earlier in this chapter. These findings highlight that government incentives that assist with relocating city-born teachers to RRR areas was helpful, however, incentives kept the door open for ECTs to leave RRR schools and return to the city. While it appears there's a need for government incentives to encourage city-born ECTs to work in RRR areas, their focus on external factors plays a crucial role in influencing the future intentions of these city-born teachers. This finding is supported by Roberts and Downes (2020) who stressed that "financial incentives that dominate current policy run the risk of exacerbating the staffing problem. While they attract teachers…teachers remain highly vulnerable to leaving after their mandated duration of service is complete" (p. 4). The Australian Government should review the existing incentives for attracting and recruiting teachers to RRR areas as findings from this research highlight that some incentives should be retained and improved to ensure "the systems are in place" (Fleur) for ECTs to successfully relocate to RRR areas. However, it is suggested that the government critique their 'retention' incentives to enhance the likelihood of teachers remaining in RRR areas (this will be discussed later in this chapter).

Another government incentive relevant to this research's findings is access to PD, which was perceived by the ECTs in this research as a way to develop their resource characteristics. PD helps build their teaching abilities, knowledge, and skills for interacting in their RRR schools, however, travel to major capital cities for PD can be quite expensive. This finding connects with Roberts and Downes (2020) review of educational jurisdictions' incentives for RRR teachers, in which NSW is the only state that offers additional leave to attend PD. Interestingly, WA doesn't offer any incentives for teachers' PD (Roberts & Downes, 2020); this might explain Fleur's experience in her remote context, in which the expectation is that PD is undertaken in her school holidays rather than during term time. These findings are consistent with those of Lyons et al. (2006) and Lock et al. (2012) in which RRR teachers lack of PD opportunities in RRR areas led to feelings of geographical and professional isolation. Attending PD can be expensive for RRR ECTs with registration, travel and accommodation costs, but also problematic as finding a relief teacher to cover lessons for those attending PD is challenging with the current teacher shortage (AITSL, 2018). For ECTs restricted by distance, finances, and time to attend face-to-face PD, improved RRR internet connectivity has provided an accessible, affordable, and convenient option of online PD. AITSL (2023) suggest that "the professional learning landscape has changed… the primary mode of professional learning has shifted to online activities. There has been a marked decline in face-to-face learning courses being undertaken outside of the workplace" (p. 3). One way to meet the PL needs of ECTs is to create PLCs to connect and develop fellow teachers in RRR contexts. Daisy experienced professional support from her PLC, a "network of teachers in a similar position, similar location, similar grade levels, so you can bounce ideas around…make sure that we're across all the new evidence." This finding reflects Hargreaves et al. (2018) and Lampert et al. (2021) findings that PL networks facilitate teacher solidarity in sharing professional knowledge, support during challenging times, a sense of wellbeing and belonging, and plays a role in reducing the isolation of working in RRR areas.

These stories highlight the opportunities and incentives that governments and universities provide to ECTs in RRR areas in this research, but there are areas ECTs believe could be improved to help support their experiences, such as mitigating the teacher shortage, ITE RRR practicums, government RRR incentives, and access to PD and PLCs.

6.5.2 Community clichés and engagement

Findings from this research reveal the macrosystemic RRR misconceptions held by city-born ECTs, which influence their expectations of RRR areas. City-born ECTs either have no prior knowledge or expectations of their RRR area, or imagine the clichés of dry remote deserts,

deserted streets, no roads or services except for a little general store. Misconceptions are challenged once these ECTs experience their RRR reality. Once they are in their RRR community, they realise there are resources and roads, and the RRR community aren't "clichéd town folk" (Ava) but are really welcoming. Another misconception concerns RRR schools. Before Bridget started her RRR teaching position, negative rumours emerged of a working class rough school, disengaged students who disrespected teachers; however Bridget experienced the opposite once she started teaching. Previous research supports these findings; stereotypes and expectations exist, but RRR ECTs create positive perspectives and understandings when they personally experience the reality of RRR communities (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). These misconceptions and rumours are not the true story; a new narrative can be written and shared through governments, universities, schools, communities, RRR teachers, and media outlets that highlight positive experiences and success stories of RRR Australia and the teaching profession to help challenge enduring misconceptions and shift public perception.

The small, closely-knit RRR community also influence the ECTs' interactions and experiences. ECTs are living in close proximity to their RRR school, often seeing students and parents in the local community. City-born ECTs feel overwhelm with the visibility among the RRR community, where "nothing goes unnoticed" (Ava); they advise to be charming, pleasant, and embrace it. These findings resonate with previous research that teachers living in a small community feel a sense of a loss of privacy and anonymity, like they're constantly 'on show', and having to maintain their professional persona in public (Lock et al., 2012; Sharplin, 2002). Interestingly, two ECTs notice the implicit RRR community norms. Charlie shared that newcomers must "enfold their way in that community scheme…fit your way into the web" and warned that "unless you fit into that scheme… you end up being an outsider". These findings are supported by previous research, which showed that in RRR communities "where everyone knows everyone else", one can discern "'who is an insider, who is an outsider', or who is a 'local' and who is a 'blow in'" (Halsey, 2018a, p. 18). Daisy was "accepted into the fold" by "a couple of key players…the unofficial mayors…the community leaders", seeing her as part of the community. Baills et al. (2002) reported similar findings that beginning teachers can gain respect from the community when they make connections with local residents. Reciprocally, RRR communities can foster connections with ECTs by being welcoming and helping ECTs to feel "more of a local" (Ava).

ECTs from this research advise that teachers arriving to a RRR area, who don't know anyone, should make the time and effort to get involved and build connections with the community. They suggest engaging in community activities outside of school, attending afternoon teas,

organising committees, and joining art, music, and performance groups. Bridget and her husband took advantage of the unique RRR landscape in their area, such as paddle boarding, fishing, mountain bike riding, bush walking, and snowboarding in the winter. These findings broadly support Gibson's (1994) findings that interacting, socialising, and offering their skills and talents to community activities was an important survival strategy for teachers to feel successful in their rural teaching context. RRR schools and communities can embrace the arrival of ECTs to the area, proactively create opportunities for social connection, and support their active engagement in the different aspects the RRR life. Conversely, ECTs must build relationships and actively engage with their local community, as well as embrace the RRR lifestyle and landscape and "just give it a go" (Charlie).

Collectively, these stories emphasise the importance of ECTs' interactions with their RRR communities, as well as the RRR misconceptions that are challenged once ECTs experience working and living in these areas.

Summary. This chapter section highlights the exosystemic and macrosystemic factors that influence ECTs' work and life in RRR Australia, such as university opportunities, government incentives, and interactions with the RRR communities. The following section will synthesise the key findings from this research, the contributions to knowledge, its limitations, and directions for future research.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

Through the bioecological theoretical framework and wellbeing conceptual framework, Chapter 6's Discussion interpretated and analysed the findings from this research to answer the research question *What are the factors that influence early career teachers' work and life in rural areas?* It established links with the existing literature and offered suggestions to educational stakeholders.

This concluding chapter will synthesise the key findings and overall recommendations from this research, its contributions to knowledge, its implications, limitations, and potential directions for future research.

7.1 Denouement

Findings from the ECTs' stories highlight the complex bidirectional interactions between the ECTs' personal characteristics (their unique resources and dispositions) and their contextual systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem) and its influence on their experiences of working and living in RRR Australia. The findings identify that it is not a matter of thriving or surviving but variations between these states of being. When challenges become overwhelming, the ECTs reflect a sense of just surviving, but this state can shift quickly when they have a greater sense of control over their work and receive positive feedback from leaders, mentors, and recognise their role in their students' success. They have more to say about micro- and mesosystemic influences, which is not surprising, as they were seeking to establish themselves in new and unique roles and settings. However, exo- and macrosystemic factors certainly influence their experiences and generate several recommendations for policy makers, ITE programs, and future ECTs. In gathering data across a year, the ECTs are able to capture their moments of surviving in their RRR context, but also their growth, resilience, and ongoing commitment to teaching, as well as the aspects of their work and lives that helps them thrive.

These findings align with previous research of Hine et al. (2022) ecological framework of educator wellbeing, Price and McCallum (2015) ecological influences on PSTs wellbeing and 'fitness', and Kelly and Fogarty's (2015) model of internal and external factors influencing teachers in rural and remote Australia, but it extends the application by using a *bio*ecological theory and the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as a theoretical framework. This offered a different approach to understanding what and how the ECTs' personal characteristics, and the nested

systems of influence, interact and shape their RRR work and life experiences over the course of a year. Furthermore, findings from this research are supported by Willis and Louth's (2024) recent paper of ECTs' experiences of RRR teaching. Although different methodologies (critical ethnographic case study) and methods (quantitative and qualitative survey at one time point) were employed, Willis and Louth's (2024) findings add to my argument that RRR experiences are unique to all teachers and requires holistic support to ensure all teachers thrive in these locations.

ECTs' geographical background appears to be a likely predictor of long-term RRR teacher retention, as both RRR-born ECTs intend to remain in RRR education and most city-born ECTs intend to return to their home cities. Identifying and recruiting ECTs who want to commit to RRR teaching, rather than transient ECTs, is worthy of further inquiry - we must invest in teachers who are invested in RRR education in the long-term. As city-born ECTs intend to leave RRR teaching after completing their bonded term, future research could help us understand how this transience may influence their effort and attitude towards their work ethic and student learning. Connectedness and support from family and friends is important for ECTs; if this were a factor influencing ECTs surviving and thriving in RRR areas, future research could explore how far we can place ECTs from their support system. Attracting and recruiting ECTs who can maintain connections and support from their family and friends may fare better when working and living in RRR Australia. For partners, husbands and/or wives who relocate with ECTs to RRR areas, research could examine how can they work remotely, or work-from-home, in RRR Australia. While it is crucial to understand how many, and why, ECTs leave RRR teaching, it is also important to undertake more research on those who remain working and living in these areas (Lampert et al, 2018). This could help develop ideal supportive thriving contexts for all teachers who choose and continue to teach in RRR Australia.

ECTs flourish when teaching their students; it appears that the excessive unnecessary workload has them scrambling in survival mode and compromising the balance between work and their professional and personal wellbeing. Government, education systems, universities, and schools could help ECTs navigate and balance their RRR work and life by better understanding the complexities of their work and rethinking their working conditions. Further research could further explore ECTs' experiences of excessive workload and burdens of compliance, surveillance and data-based accountability. Ask ECTs for solutions to their excessive workload and the professional and personal supports they need. By listening to the ECTs' needs, and accounting for their personal characteristics, stakeholders can personalise and enhance support and build capacity

and resilience so ECTs do more than just survive working and living in RRR areas but thrive in the profession.

Applying research portraiture (to illustrate the evolving themes within each ECT's experiences) and research poems (to illustrate the holistic themes across all ECTs) approaches as an alternative, unique way of reinterpreting and re-presenting the findings and contributing to new knowledge. By crafting portraits and poems with the ECTs' words, it captures and honours the ECTs' voice and communicates their RRR experiences for audiences to access, understand, and connect. This research offers a novel approach to re-presenting one's qualitative findings and provides an outline of the process for shaping research portraits and crafting research poems so other researchers may replicate the method.

The narrative review of Australian literature into ECTs in RRR Australia, detailed in Chapter 2, identified that previous research has overlooked a resonant, nuanced, detailed exploration of ECTs' reflection on their RRR work and life experiences during a school year using a longitudinal qualitative approach. This research contributes towards important, rich insights and comprehensive understanding of the ECTs' experiences, development, wellbeing, and growth over a year and the holistic support they need to survive and thrive in their work and life in RRR Australia.

The longitudinal qualitative nature of gathering data contributes to research as it allowed ECTs to reflect on and capture their experiences, significant moments, and their development from the beginning and the end of a school year. The impact of this research highlights the value of offering ECTs the opportunity to reflect on their journey and their growth, evident in the following email correspondence from two of the ECTs:

> I must say a big thank you for the opportunity to take part in this research. Your focus on the positive aspects has really helped me consider how I can deal with potentially draining or negative situations in a positive light. This year is going to be a great year for developing my own resilience and being aware of the boundaries I need to set mentally to maintain a positive attitude that focuses on potential rather than deficit. On that note, if you have any tips from other participants or your research on this area I would really appreciate it (Fleur, personal communication, February 22, 2020).

> Thanks for the opportunity to review the narrative you have drafted - it was a great chance to revisit some of my thinking form 2019. The narrative was accurate and is an effective communication tool. While obviously a lot has changed in the world since 2019, I'm still

teaching and the narrative holds true to my motivations and thoughts today (Edward, personal communication, April 29, 2023).

While the scope of this thesis has been restricted to analysing data gathered across one year, I received the following ECTs' email. Their more recent communication highlights the value of researching across a longer period to determine how personal and contextual factors, of the bioecological model, continue to influence the lives and work of teachers in RRR Australia:

From city-born Bridget, who was on a temporary contract and intended to remain in RRR teaching:

Thank you for including me in your research. I hope all is well with you. I was offered a permanent position as a Learning and Support Teacher at my school through a closed merit selection. I thought I'd provide an update 😊 Thank you and all the best (Bridget, personal communication, June 16, 2023).

Charlie, who in Term 4 "finally made it across the line and…survived":

2020 has started, indeed, but it's not without its challenges. I've got a few students that are a real handful and I sometimes feel like Sisyphus: pushing that rock up the hill only for it to come tumbling down the next day (Charlie, personal communication, February 23, 2020).

And Fleur, who initially shared a home with the principal:

We've moved in to the new (bigger) house with relatively few issues, and it's made a great difference to our daily lives. With the extra space we've set up a home gym and my husband and I are getting up early together (it's only taken 19 years!) and doing cardio or weights or yoga almost every day. This has had a huge impact to my wellbeing.

Just reading the final comments I made, I mentioned about well-being really closely tied into who my colleagues are. This year we've had a change of staff so I'm no longer (one of) the newest staff members and that has changed my outlook slightly. Also with new staff come new personalities and the change in environment that brings (Fleur, personal communication, February 22, 2020).

The current teacher crisis has brought about more conversations between governments, education systems, and universities. Policies, reforms, reports, reviews, and research aim to address the perennial teacher shortage and RRR staffing issues, and print, television, and social media often portray the teaching profession in a negative light. This research raises an important question - where are the ECTs' voices among these narratives? ECTs are an integral part of the

broader conversation surrounding the future of RRR education and the teaching profession. The rich in-depth stories from this research contribute to our understanding of the circumstances and conditions in which ECTs' experience challenges and growth in RRR areas; such personal insight cannot come from statistics, figures, or percentages. In general, teachers' voices and stories need to be listened to, shared, and valued if we are to succeed in addressing the issues, shortages, and crisis facing the teaching profession. How dire will the teacher crisis become before contextualised transformative change and action takes place?

The small number of ECT participating in this research presents a limitation, as does the lack of representation of ECTs from all states and territories in Australia. Extending a similar research approach with additional ECTs, and over an extended period of time, is recommended. The findings of this research are not generalisable, but when aligned with previous and future research, provides an opportunity to contribute to a much needed, and sustained focus, on ECTs' working and living in RRR Australia.

Reflecting on the research process and outcomes, I note the limited reference by ECTs to aspects of the geographic, demographic, and economic contexts (Reid et al., 2010) in which they are working. This may have been due to the focus of the questions I posed to the ECTs. I was particularly interested in their sense of being in their new positions and locations. Certainly, reference is made to the rural, regional, and/or remote nature of their locations, as noted in the Findings and Discussion chapters, and on clichés and misconceptions of RRR life. There is a focus on some demographic aspects, including size of the town's population, but little on types of employment or economic circumstances of the community. Economic conditions play a significant role in the wellbeing of rural, regional, and remote communities with Reid et al (2010) posing questions such as "Do economic conditions produce materially different life-experiences for people who live in a particular place?" Such a focus is not explored in this research but is certainly recommended for future research given the varied economic status of RRR locations in Australia.

The findings from this research were gathered before the COVID-19 pandemic and the working from home movement. During and since the pandemic, the Australian Government (2024) reported a small increase in employed people moving to inland country areas and even more to coastal country areas. How the impact of COVID-19 has influenced ECTs in RRR areas is another area for additional research. Post-pandemic, what are their motivations for working and living in these areas? What university opportunities and government incentives are now offered to ECTs to

teach/work and live in RRR areas? What part do ECTs' microsystemic relationships play in their RRR work and life?

Throughout the research process, I was also mindful of the commitment of the ECTs in this research made to furthering our understanding of living and working in RRR Australia. I am exceptionally grateful for the time and stories they provided and trust that I have done justice to their stories. I hope those in positions of greater power and decision-making gain insights from my and other similar research and, through collective knowledge, we make progress towards addressing the ongoing challenges of ensuring those living in RRR Australia receive equitable opportunities for a quality education. Perhaps the words of Fleur are an important reminder as to why supporting our ECT in RRR location is so critical; "I've always felt really strongly about providing a really good education to the children…being the best that I can be with what I know…but always having the children and their learning at the forefront of what I do".

At a time when the current teacher shortage is gripping our nation, listening to teacher voice is more important than ever. From early career to experienced, country to city, teachers must tell their stories. The media, governments, and universities are not the storytellers, but characters within a larger tale. Stakeholders must value, provide opportunities, and listen to teachers' voices, perspectives, and experiences of their work and life in the profession. Engage in conversation. Change the narrative. Support our teachers in seeking to sustain workforce excellence in RRR locations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethics approval

Dear Elizabeth,

Your conditional approval response for project 8240 was reviewed by the Chairperson of the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) and was **approved**. The ethics approval notice can be found below.

APPROVAL NOTICE

Project No.:	8240
Project Title:	Flourishing in rural schools: Graduate teachers' perceptions of their wellbeing in their new profession
Principal Researcher:	Miss Elizabeth Mann
Email:	mann0159@flinders.edu.au

Approval Date:	7 January 2019	Ethics Approval Expiry Date:	31 July 2023

The above proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application, its attachments and the information subsequently provided.

Appendix 2: Letter of introduction

Dr Jessie Jovanovic
College of Education, Psychology and
Social Work
GPO Box 2100
Adelaide SA 5001
Tel: 08 8201 5716
Jessie.jovanovic@flinders.edu.au
www.flinders.edu.au
CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

Date

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear

This letter is to introduce Miss Elizabeth Mann who is a doctoral student in the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University.

Elizabeth is undertaking research in the area of 'Flourishing in rural schools: graduate teachers' perceptions of their wellbeing in their new profession', which will lead to the production of a thesis and other publications on the subject.

She would like to invite you to assist with this project by completing a wellbeing survey, agreeing to be interviewed and reflecting in a journal which covers certain aspects of this topic. Participation is voluntary. You may choose to participate in either interviews or reflective journaling, or both interviews and reflective journaling.

The online wellbeing survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Each interview will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes over two or four occasions (either face-to-face, online, or telephone), and journal reflections will be at the participant's discretion on an online private portal.

Any information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence. All respondents will remain deidentified before any publication of the results. While all information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small population pool of participants. You are entirely free to discontinue your participation at any time or to decline to answer particular questions.

To indicate your consent to participate in this research, please complete the accompanying consent form and return via email.

Since Elizabeth intends to record audio of participant interviews, she will seek your consent, on the attached form, to record the interview, and use the recording transcript for preparing the thesis, report, or other publications, on condition that your name or identity is not revealed. You may read and accept the interview transcript to ensure the accuracy of data collected.

An online portfolio will be made available for you to use for your journal reflections. As your portfolio will be private, you may choose what content may be shared for this research. Any content will be deidentified and that the confidentiality of the material is respected and maintained.

Any enquiries you may have concerning this project should be directed to me at the address given above, by telephone on 8201 5716 or e-mail jessie.jovanovic@flinders.edu.au.

Thank you for your attention and assistance.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jessie Jovanovic

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

inspiring
achievement

Appendix 3: Information Sheet

Dr Jessie Jovanovic
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

Sturt Road
Bedford Park SA 5042

GPO Box 2100
Adelaide SA 5001

Tel: +61 8 201 5716
jessie.jovanovic@flinders.edu.au
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CRICOS Provider No. 01114A

Flinders
UNIVERSITY
ADELAIDE • AUSTRALIA

INFORMATION SHEET

Title: Flourishing in rural schools: graduate teachers' perceptions of their wellbeing in their new profession.

Researcher
Miss Elizabeth Mann
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University
Email: mann0159@flinders.edu.au

Supervisor(s)
Dr Jessie Jovanovic
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University
Tel: 8201 5716

Associate Professor Kerry Bissaker
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University
Tel: 8201 5376

Description of the study
This study is part of the project titled 'Flourishing in rural schools: graduate teachers' perceptions of their wellbeing in their new profession.' This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

This project will investigate graduate teachers' understandings and perceptions of their sense of wellbeing and the influences on their flourishing in their first rural teaching appointment. Wellbeing is more than happiness; it involves increasing the flourishing in one's life by improving and growing one's positive emotions, positive engagement, positive relationships, positive meaning, and positive accomplishments (Seligman, 2011).

Using a mixed methods research design, this project will survey as many graduate teachers in rural, regional, and remote locations as possible, then a purposeful sample will be selected for follow-up interviews and participant journaling to explore their wellbeing in more detail.

inspiring
achievement

Purpose of the study
This project aims to
- understand graduate teachers' wellbeing during their first year of rural teaching;
- identify how their wellbeing may change during their first rural teaching appointment;
- discover ways graduate teachers flourish in their first rural appointment; and
- suggest how the education system may support graduate teacher wellbeing to attract, recruit, and retain teachers in rural, regional, and remote schools.

What will I be asked to do?
As a graduate teacher who has been appointed to a rural teaching position, you are invited to complete an online survey and subsequently indicate if you wish to participate in follow-up interviews (online, telephone, or face-to-face) and reflective participant journaling (online). Your participation in this study is voluntary.

The online wellbeing survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Elizabeth will contact you for interviews and reflective journaling. You may choose to participate in both interviews and reflective journaling, or only interviews, or only reflective journaling.

Each interview will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes over two or four occasions, depending on the duration of employment, and conducted either online, telephone, or face-to-face, whichever the participant has chosen. In the interviews we will ask questions regarding your perceptions and understandings of your wellbeing. The interview will be audio recorded, using a digital voice recorder, to help with reviewing the results. Once recorded, the interview will be transcribed (typed-up), by a professional transcription company, and securely stored within Flinders University's cloud-based system, under password protection. You may read and accept the interview transcript to ensure accuracy of the information collected.

Participant journaling requires you to reflect on your wellbeing, at your convenience, on an online private portal. Reflections may include when you demonstrated flourishing or languishing behaviours while teaching, in your interactions with staff or parents, and in your engagement with the school community. An online portfolio will be made available for you to use for your journal reflections. As your portfolio will be private, you may choose what content may be shared for this research. All respondents will remain deidentified before any publication of the results. While all information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small population pool of participants.

What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?
The sharing of your experiences will contribute to an understanding of how graduate teachers' perceive and understand their wellbeing and experiences during their first year of teaching in a rural school.

This information from this study will be shared within the teaching sector. Findings will help us to identify key influences on graduate teachers' wellbeing and the ways they can be supported to flourish in their first rural teaching appointment, and suggest how the education system can support the wellbeing of teachers in these communities.

2

Reflections from the participant journaling can count towards your 60-hours of professional development for teacher registration, presenting stories of practice as examples of your teaching growth over time.

Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?
While all information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small population pool of participants

Once the recorded interviews have been transcribed, saved as a file, and read and accepted by the participant, all voice recordings will be destroyed.

Participant journals will be written on an online portal which will be password protected by the participant; access to only the reflections will be requested by the researcher.

Any identifying information from the interviews and participant journaling will be removed, and comments will not be linked directly to the participant.

All information obtained in this study will be securely stored within Flinders University's cloud-based system, under password protection, with access restricted to Elizabeth and her supervisors.

Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?
Elizabeth anticipates few risks from this study; however, given the nature of the project, some participants may experience emotional discomfort. Possible burdens or risks of a participant to not flourishing in rural schools include isolation, distance from family and friends' support, the lack of available resources, teaching multiple year levels with few colleagues, inaccessibility of professional development. If any serious indictable offences were observed by or disclosed to the researcher during the interviews or journaling, it will be reported to the relevant authorities.

If you have any concerns regarding anticipated or actual risks or discomforts, no matter how minor, please contact any support services from the list below:

Call Beyondblue
T: 1300 22 636 (24 hours / 7 days a week)

Chat with Beyondblue online (3pm – 12am, 7 days a week)
https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/get-immediate-support

Email Beyondblue (responds within 24 hours)
https://online.beyondblue.org.au/WebModules/Email/InitialInformation.aspx

Call LIFELINE
T: 13 11 14

Chat with LIFELINE
https://www.lifeline.org.au/Get-Help/Online-Services/crisis-chat

3

Head to Health - This website provides tailored support for rural and remote individuals, live chat, and digital resources.
https://headtohealth.gov.au/

How do I agree to participate?
Participation in the online survey is voluntary and anonymous.

Participants who complete the online survey can decide to not continue with the follow-up interviews and participant journaling. There aren't any consequences from declining to further participate.

Once participants have volunteered to continue in the study, and provided their contact details, Elizabeth will be in touch soon afterwards. You may choose to participate in
- both interviews and reflective journaling,
- interviews only,
- or reflective journaling only.

The interviews will be arranged at a mutually convenient time and method (online, telephone, or face-to-face). Participants may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions, and are free to withdraw from the interview and participant journaling at any time without effect or consequences.

A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate in this study, please read and sign the form and send it back to me at mann0159@flinders.edu.au.

Recognition of contribution
If you would like to participate, in recognition of your contribution and participation time, you will be provided with a membership for an 'Edufolio'. This will be provided for you upon completion of the interview.

How will I receive feedback?
If you wish, Elizabeth will only provide one executive summary of the overall findings to the participant upon project completion (around 2022) via email and/or website.
Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, and we trust that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (8240).
For more information regarding ethical approval of the project only, the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on (08) 8201 3116, by fax on (08) 8201 2035, or by email to human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

4

Appendix 4: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

(Interviews)

Flourishing in rural schools: early career teachers' perceptions of their wellbeing in their new profession.

I ....

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate as requested in the .... for the research project with the title listed above.

1.   I have read the information provided.

2.   Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.

3.   I agree to the audio recording of my interviews.

4.   I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.

5.   I understand that:

   - I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research
   - Participation is entirely voluntary and I am free to withdraw from the project at any time; and can decline to answer particular questions
   - I may choose to participate in both interviews and reflective journaling, or only interviews, or only reflective journaling
   - The information gained in this study will be published and participants will be deidentified
   - While all information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small population pool of participants
   - Whether or I participate or not, or withdraw after participating, will have no effect on my current employment
   - I may ask that the audio recording be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage
   - Any serious indictable offences which is observed by or disclosed to the researcher during the interviews or journaling, it will be reported to the relevant authorities.

6.   I understand that only the researchers on this project will have access to my research data; unless I explicitly provide consent for it to be shared with other parties.

Participant's name...

Participant's signature...Date.......................

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher's name   **Elizabeth Mann**

**Researcher's signature**   Date 21/10/2019

NB: Two signed copies should be obtained. The copy retained by the researcher may then be used for authorisation of Item 8 as appropriate.

8.   I, the participant whose signature appears below, have read a transcript of my interview participation and agree to its use by the researcher as explained.

Participant's signature...Date.......................

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number 8240). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project please contact the Executive Officer on (08) 8201-3116 or human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

Appendix 5: Email example Term 1

Outlook
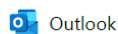
Graduate Wellbeing Research Follow-up

From Liz Mann <lizzy.mann@flinders.edu.au>
Date Mon 21/01/2019 4:10 PM
To ▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊▊

2 attachments (648 KB)
Consent Form - Interview and Journaling.doc; Information Sheet.doc;

Dear ▊▊▊▊

Thank you for completing the online wellbeing survey and for indicating an interest in participating in either follow-up interviews or online reflective journaling, or both interviews and journaling, for my research entitled: *Flourishing in rural schools: graduate teachers' perceptions of their wellbeing in their new profession.*

The purpose of the follow-up interviews and/or reflective journaling is to get a more holistic deeper understanding of influences and impacts on graduate teachers' experiences of their wellbeing during their first teaching year in a rural, regional, or remote school in Australia.

My aim is to publish these findings through conference presentations, research papers, and my thesis, to highlight your experiences to key people in the education sector. Your contact details are kept confidential and all identifying names and locations will be de-identified from this research.

At a time which suits you, the **interview/s**, with me is expected to take between 45 minutes and one hour. This can be in person, on the phone, or via Skype/Zoom. You will have the opportunity to review your interview transcript and make alterations/additions.

If you wish to participate in the **reflective journaling**, you can write your entries at your convenience. These responses can be done via email, private messaging on my Facebook group 'Graduate Teachers' Flourishing', or on an online private portal (e.g. Edufolio, Wix, Weebly) of which you control the privacy and what I, the researcher, can access.

The prompts/questions in the interviews and/or reflective journaling will focus on your perceptions and understanding of your wellbeing when you teach, in your interactions with staff, and your engagement in the school and wider community in your rural, regional, or remote teaching context.

Are you interested in continuing with this research?

If you are interested, I have attached another information sheet and consent form for you to carefully read.

If you would like to participate in the interviews and/or reflective journaling with me regarding your wellbeing in your context, please read, complete, sign, and return the consent form to me via email.

If at any point you change your mind about participating between now and the interview, or in between journal reflections, you can simply email or phone to let me know that you would prefer not to be part of this research; there will not be any repercussions for withdrawing and your data will not be used.

Please let me know, via email or text, when you are available to discuss the interview and/or reflective journaling process.
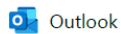
Feel free to join my Facebook page **Graduate Teachers' Flourishing** for wellbeing ideas, support and discussions.

Thank you for your ongoing participation...I look forward to hearing from you soon ☺

Kindest regards

Lizzy Mann
B.A., B.Ed., M.Ed., B.PS.
Registered Teacher

CAT in EDUC4820 The Professional Educator
Ed.D focus: Graduate Teacher's Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing in Rural Education

College of Education, Psychology & Social Work
Flinders University
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GPO Box 2100 Adelaide SA 5001

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E: mann0159@flinders.edu.au

Appendix 6: Email example Term 4

Outlook

Touching base - PERMA Wellbeing

From Liz Mann <lizzy.mann@flinders.edu.au>
Date Sun 20/10/2019 8:47 PM
To ███████████████████

Hi ██████

It's hard to believe we're reaching the end of 2019 already!

Just touching base with you to see if you are interested in a follow-up interview to reflect on your wellbeing and see how 2019 has progressed.

If you are keen to be involved, I'm happy to work around a time that would suit you for a phone call.

An added bonus…it is also fantastic evidence for ongoing reflective practice under AITSL Standard 6 & 7 too.

If you want to find out what your PERMA wellbeing is like now, follow the link to the survey:
https://qualtrics.flinders.edu.au/jfe/form/SV_8ieR0tqxZZfKBHT

Looking forward to hearing from you 🙂

Kind regards

Lizzy Mann
B.A., B.Ed., M.Ed., B.PS.
Registered Teacher
CAT in EDUC 9733 The Psychology of Learning & Instruction
CAT in EDUC 9734 Applications of Psychology to Learning & Instruction
CAT in EDUC 9702 Teaching & Learning to Promote Wellbeing & Positive Mental Health in Schools
CAT in EDUC 9401/9408 Teacher as Researcher
M.Ed Coursework Project Supervisor

Research Assistant
Ed.D focus: Early Career Teacher's Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing in Rural, Regional & Remote Schools

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Appendix 7: Example of interview questions Term 1

Would you give me some background about your teaching experience and context?

What motivated you to teach in a rural, regional, or remote school?

What were your expectations for teaching in a rural, regional, or remote school?

In what ways has your wellbeing changed from when you started teaching till now? (since the start of term/end of term/ the holidays/last semester/ beginning of the year)?

How satisfied are you with the balance between the time you spend on your paid work, and the time you spend on other aspects of your life?

Recall a recent time when you feel you flourished? Perhaps the classroom while teaching, in your interactions with students, staff, or parents, or your engagement with the school or local community?

based on your life right now, what kind of time and energy is realistic for you to spend trying to improve your wellbeing?

Where does looking after your wellbeing fit into your daily schedule?

How confident are you that you can manage your own wellbeing?

How motivated are you to improve your wellbeing?

Positive emotion. When are you happiest at work? What emotion are you experiencing?

Describe a time when you expanded your thinking – thought outside of the box, were creative, and/or when you may have built on your personal resources.

Recall a time when you felt gratitude, a mindful moment, or there was positivity in your day.

Engagement. What do you love most about your current role? What strength are you using?

Recollect a recent time when you were absorbed in an activity (flow), especially if it were challenging yet achievable to complete, or when you were so absorbed in an activity that you lost track of time.

Describe a moment when you have engaged in creativity/been passionate/motivated in the classroom while teaching, in your interactions with students, staff, or parents, and/or in your engagement with the school or local community.

Relationships. Who supports you most at work? Who do you support?

Think about your experiences over the past week/month. When have you experienced compassion/forgiveness/kindness/teamwork/empathy in the classroom while teaching, in your interactions with students, staff, or parents, and your engagement with the school or local community?

Tell me about a recent time when you experienced authentic connectedness or understanding of yourself and/or others.

Consider your experiences over the past week/month. Describe a moment when you felt a sense of belonging/had a sense of direction/made a positive difference.

Recall a recent time when you were serving a greater purpose, such as volunteering or helping others.

Meaning. What is most important to you about your role? Why do you do what you do?

Recall a recent moment when you achieved success, perhaps in the classroom while teaching, in your interactions with students, staff, or parents, and your engagement with the school or local community.

Tell me about when you may have experienced a challenge which you persevered and showed grit.

Accomplishment. What big or small achievements have you made in the past week-month?

Consider your experiences over the past week/month. Describe a moment when you felt a sense of achievement, accomplished a goal/ celebrated a success.

What are your goals and How much of the time do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your goals?

To what extent are you successful at completing difficult tasks and projects in your job?
How often do you achieve the important goals you have set for yourself?

How do you maintain your wellbeing while teaching in a rural, regional, or remote school?

What are the most significant factors enhancing the quality of your work-life balance?

Have your goals regarding your teaching changed? In what ways? Why?

What wellbeing strategies could graduate teachers use in their first year in a rural, regional, or remote community?

In your opinion, what are the greatest opportunities for flourishing in one's first year in a rural, regional, or remote school?

What might better support graduate teachers' wellbeing and experiences in rural, regional, or remote communities?

Are there any other issues you would like to bring to my attention, or any other comments you would like to make?

What recommendations or advice would you make to those who are responsible for teacher education

Appendix 8: Example of interview questions Term 4

Recall the moments when you feel you flourished this year? Perhaps the classroom while teaching, in your interactions with students, staff, or parents, and your engagement with the school or local community?

Positive emotion. Recall when have you been happiest at work this year?

Engagement. What are you good at and enjoy doing at work?
Describe a moment when you have been engaged (passionate, motivated) while teaching, in your interactions with students, staff, or parents, and/or in your engagement with the school or local community.

Relationships. Describe a moment when you were supported or your supported others at work.
Compassion, trust, giving, psychological safety, incivility

Meaning. What has mattered most to you this year, in and out of teaching?

Accomplishment. When have you moved past a limitation this year and towards your true potential?
What big or small achievements or accomplishments have you made since Term 1?
Self-compassion, resilience

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What and who has hindered your wellbeing this year?

What and who has supported your wellbeing?

How might you maintain your wellbeing next year?

Some questions we will recap again…

Will you remain in teaching at your rural, regional, or remote school, why?
What are some reasons to remain? And to leave?

Are there any other issues you would like to bring to my attention, or any other comments you would like to make?