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Teacher job satisfaction and retention in small rural schools: A theory of recognition approach

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ABSTRACT

Small rural schools have been the focus of intensive research in Australia and internationally over the past few decades. The foci often have been on school closure/amalgamation, school leadership, curriculum and pedagogy, and school-community relationships. A less trodden research path has been the connection between small schools and rural teaching retention. This is surprising given that staffing has been a perennial challenge for rural schools. Using a theory of recognition approach, this article provides evidence of the impact of small schools on teachers' job satisfaction and their decision to stay working and living in a rural area. A theory of recognition offers a normative grammar that enhances the analysis of social relations that underpin teachers' decision to stay rural. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with rural teachers, the analysis reveals that teachers' job satisfaction is anchored in interpersonal practices of recognition that support individuals' sense of self and decision to stay. It shows that the structure and organisation of small schools provides a space for robust intersubjectivity and the construction of rural teachers' professional identity.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, small rural schools have attracted a significant amount of research interest (e.g. [Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014](#); [Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022](#); [Hargreaves, 2009](#); [Howley & Howley, 2006](#); [Raggl, 2025](#)). Small rural schools have been praised for enhancing a close relationship between school staff and the community and for their key role in the sustainability of rural towns ([Eacott, 2022](#); [Karlberg-Granlund, 2019](#); [Redford et al., 2025](#)). At the same time, research has stressed the persistent threat of closure they have suffered under policy programs of rationalisation of public services ([Cuervo, 2012](#); [Eacott, 2022](#); [Howley & Howley, 2006](#)) and the material and financial under-resourcing they experience ([Anderson & White, 2011](#); [Bagley & Hillyard, 2019](#)). Less attention, however, has been placed on the relationship between small schools and rural teacher retention. This is surprising given the current teacher shortage in Australia, with at least four out of ten teachers expressing they intend to leave the profession before retiring ([AITSL, 2025](#)). Furthermore, teacher shortage has been a perennial problem in rural areas in Australia and globally ([Burke & Buchanan, 2022](#); [Corbett & Gereluk, 2020](#); [Fish et al., 2025](#); [Raggl, 2015](#)). Rural teacher retention matters because it has a direct impact on the quality of education available to students (e.g. breadth of curriculum) and on the sustainability of rural communities (e.g. as schools close teachers and families might move out of town) ([Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018](#); [Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014](#); [Barnes et al., 2024](#); [Gristy et al., 2020](#); [Tieken, 2019](#)).

This paper focuses on the impact of small schools on teachers' job satisfaction and teacher retention. The interplay between small

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schools, job satisfaction and teacher retention is examined through the theory of recognition (Honneth, 1995, 2003). Data is drawn from a research project that investigated the factors and motivations that enable teachers to stay working in rural schools. In this article I focus on data from semi-structured interviews with fourteen teachers working in government schools in the rural northwest part of the state of Victoria, Australia. Small schools are defined as schools with less than one hundred student enrolment (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022; Hargreaves, 2009).

In rural education, inequities regarding staffing have been traditionally addressed through a better distribution of resources approach, including increasing the number of pre-service teachers' placements in rural schools and offering financial incentives for teachers to work in rural areas (Cuervo, 2023; Roberts & Downes, 2020). Similar distributive approaches of incentivising a rural teaching workforce can be seen in the Global North (see Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; Kidman et al., 2024; Li, 2024). Recently there have been scholarly efforts to rethink the question of rural school staffing from a different dimension of justice (Burke & Buchanan, 2022; Patfield, Gore & Harris, 2024). These studies have focused on recognition theory and cultural justice as an explanatory framework to understand the challenges to rural school staffing. A focus on social recognition when thinking of rural teaching enables moving away from distribution of resources as a panacea for rural staffing problems to focus on issues of interpersonal relations, cultural status, and respect and esteem for teachers working in rural schools.

In this article I focus on Axel Honneth's (1995, 2003, 2007) theory of recognition to examine the relationship between small schools and teacher job satisfaction and how this impacts teachers' decision to stay working in a rural area. At the core of Honneth's theoretical apparatus is an assertion that personhood is constructed intersubjectively; that "practical identity-formation presupposes intersubjective recognition" (1995, p. 92). In other words, one becomes an individuated and capable individual through the perspective, regard and acknowledgment of others that recognise a person's beliefs, traits, needs, and values through a set of interpersonal interactions. Honneth structured this social integration through three levels of struggle for recognition: love (self-confidence), rights (self-respect), and solidarity (self-esteem). In this article I focus on the third level; the recognition of an individual's abilities, characteristics and achievements within a context of labour and the broader society to establish a person's self-esteem. In this third level, individuals are positively recognised through the social esteem expressed in solidaristic relations with others, including at work (Zurn, 2015).

International studies linking teachers' work and recognition theory have argued that receiving social recognition is important for the constitution of teachers' identity (Huttunen & Heikkinen, 2004; Zhang et al., 2023). On the other hand, being subjected to disrespect for one's abilities, work, and traits erodes a person's identity, social integration and self-esteem. For teachers, this misrecognition of their work has generally been associated to issues of excessive workload, job burnout, and precarious employment status (see Cuervo et al., 2023; Huttunen & Heikkinen, 2004; Pietarinen et al., 2013). When teachers are recognised for their contribution in the workplace and society they can develop a positive image of themselves, of their abilities and traits, and form a community of values through solidaristic relations with others. In this paper I examine if this positive social recognition cemented in a community of values and solidaristic relations with others can enhance teachers' job satisfaction, professional identity, and attachment to small rural schools.

In what follows, I discuss issues pertaining teachers' work in relation to small rural schools. Next, I provide an explanation of the usefulness of Honneth's recognition theory to this study. Then I present the research methods, followed by comments, perspectives and experiences of teachers working in small schools outside the metropolis. The article closes with a discussion and concluding remarks about how interpersonal relations of positive social recognition might enhance teachers' job satisfaction and strengthen teacher retention in small schools in rural communities.

2. Small schools, job satisfaction and teacher retention

Despite the growing body of research on rural education over the past few decades the relationship between small schools, teacher job satisfaction and retention is still unexplored (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022). When addressed in the literature, the link between small rural schools and teacher job satisfaction often emerges in two ways: firstly, the development of a caring ethos in the school that is built through interpersonal relationship between staff and students, and their families (Karlberg-Granlund, 2019; Raggl, 2015). Secondly, through an understanding by teachers that small schools enhance the possibility of classroom and curriculum innovation (Hargreaves, 2009; Raggl, 2015; Redford et al., 2025). In terms of the former, rural teachers' identities and satisfaction in their workplace are heavily concentrated on a moral interdependence between their work and the welfare and learning of students. As teaching and learning are relational activities, the intersubjective aspect of caring between individuals forms an intrinsic part of teachers' identity and self-realisation at work. In terms of the latter, it has been noted that in some instances teachers will move from a larger to a smaller school as its structure enables a greater autonomy and freedom to explore and implement new educational ideas (Raggl, 2015). Researchers affirm that being able to put into practice their knowledge and expertise can lead to a positive development of a teacher's identity and job satisfaction and, subsequently, teacher retention (Hargreaves, 2009; Roberts, 2013).

While interpersonal relations based on care and mutuality, and autonomy to teach underpin positive aspects of teaching, several studies have brought to sharp relief the link between poor job satisfaction and teacher attrition. For example, in Australia and internationally research points out to excessive workload and administrative tasks that generate time pressure (Heffernan et al., 2022; Spicksley, 2022; Stacey, McGrath-Champ & Wilson, 2023) and a lack of autonomy and freedom in teaching practices and curriculum (Cuervo, 2020; Hargreaves, 2009; Roberts, 2013), which impacts teachers' satisfaction at work. Other studies highlight concerns about increasing government and public demands on teachers, including feelings of being undervalued, that impact their wellbeing (Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; Fray et al., 2023; Mockler, 2022; Smith et al., 2025), and poor employment conditions and a lack of competitive salaries after a few years in the profession (Department of Education, 2022). Echoing Honneth's moral grammar of recognition, this

disrespect and denigration of teachers' work makes it harder for them to construct narratives and stories that can constitute and reaffirm their professional selves. This is important because teachers' professional identity is often understood to be built through "the way that teachers, both individually and collectively, view and understand themselves as teachers" (Mockler, 2011, p. 518). Disrespect or denigration of teachers' work and value in society can lead to dissatisfaction at work and an increase in teacher attrition.

While the reasons for poor job satisfaction are well documented in the education research literature, there is a paucity of research in rural education. There are some exceptions that have focused on research on positive job satisfaction in rural schools. In Australia, for example, Roberts (2013: 97) has identified the "development of an authentic rural pedagogy and curriculum," that is underpinned by taking the idea and practice of place seriously, as "fundamental for teacher satisfaction and well-being". Some international studies have found that teachers working in well-resourced schools and with positive links to the community expressed strong job satisfaction (Klassen et al., 2009; Versland, Schmitt-Wilson & Downey, 2022). Trust in teachers' expertise and professionalism has been linked to supportive leadership, where the role of the principal is a key to enhance this positive school culture (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Willis et al., 2017).

3. A theory of recognition approach

In this paper I draw on Axel Honneth's (1995, 2003, 2007) recognition theory to examine the link between small schools and teachers' job satisfaction and teacher retention. Within Honneth's three forms of recognition, I place the emphasis on his third form: self-esteem. At risk of over-summarising Honneth's theoretical project, it is fair to say that one of his primary concerns is to understand how individuals develop and sustain their identity, as practical and moral beings, in their specific contexts and within an environment of social freedom. For Honneth (1995) a person develops their sense of self in so far their interactions with and the recognition from others. At the core of his approach to justice it has been a focus on intersubjectivity and the process of recognition from significant others and institutions to explain individuals' and social groups' development of autonomy and self-realisation. For Honneth it is the recognition from others of our own characteristics, traits, and abilities that enhances our sense of who we are, that anchors us in the social world and enables a healthy view of our self.

Honneth (1995) structures this struggle for recognition by individuals into three levels: an elementary level, through love and friendship, within the context of family and intimate ones (self-confidence). A second level which pertains to the provision of full legal rights by institutions and other members of the community (self-respect). The third level, the most relevant for this article's discussion, entails the recognition of one's abilities, traits and achievements within a context of labour and the broader society (esteem). Esteem is a form of social valuing and judgements of worth of individuals' characteristics, abilities and attainments. Important in this article and study is the negative form of recognition of self-esteem: cultural denigration and social disrespect. This refers to the persistent denigration, degrading or disrespect of certain cultures and ways of life (Honneth, 1995, 2007). For Honneth this occurs when the recognition and valorisation of certain ways of being and cultures are denigrated and disrespected by other members of society, which can have a detrimental impact on the development of a healthy self-esteem for those members of a community who are denigrated.

In the rural education research literature, there is a view that there is a social disrespect, a persistent deficit policy approach that sees little value to small schools and that suggests that this deficiency can be corrected through school amalgamation in rural places (Bajerski, 2020; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022). While policymakers and other educational authorities might view school consolidation as primarily a matter of economic efficiency and better allocation of resources, rural communities and scholars have often viewed it as a sign of disrespect and neglect to the lives of those outside the metropolis (see Corbett & Gerehuk, 2020; Gristy et al., 2020). In the European context, scholars have pointed out that "education in rural areas has for decades been almost invisible: unseen, underfunded, under-researched, underestimated, and overgeneralized: an irritant for governments – 'the stone in Europe's shoe'" (Hargreaves, 2020, p. 5). Further, this social disrespect has also been noted in the lack of rural knowledge in school curriculum (Roberts, 2013) and in rural teaching viewed by education policy as a poorer option to teaching in metropolitan places (see Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Roberts & Downes, 2020).

This disrespect can also be present in the sphere of work, whereas one's labour is undervalued and misrecognised by others. This matters for an individual's self-realisation in society because as Honneth (2014) argues, labour continues to deeply shape people's social identity. According to Honneth there still a "longing for a job that provides not only a livelihood, but also a personal satisfaction" (p. 57). Work has also retained its normative significance in Honneth's view. Being unemployed still carries a social stigma and precarious work is burdensome, whereas both statuses are regarded as an individual's failure. This has important implications for teachers, particularly early career, as this is a profession that contains significant degree of employment precarity (Department of Education, 2022). Ultimately, when an individual can no longer recognise a value on their patterns of self-realisation within their social context, including at work, this means that the avenues for positive recognition of one's achievements and characteristics are closed.

4. Research methods

This article is based on a research study investigating the factors and motivations that enhance teachers' decision to stay working and living in a rural area. To investigate this the project focused on four domains of teachers' working and living experiences: the classroom, school, personal, and community. In this article I focus on the domains of classroom and school practices to understand what issues happening within the school walls impact on teachers' job satisfaction and retention. While a decision to stay working in a rural community might be well affected by issues outside school walls (e.g. community relations, quality of life, access to amenities and services), here I am interested in understanding what teachers consider are significant factors and resources in school labour and

relations that enhance their job satisfaction and, ultimately, their retention. The focus on schools' domains enables a better application of Honneth's third level of recognition.

The study was conducted in the northwest region of Victoria, Australia. This is the region in the state with greater number of teacher vacancies. Ethics approval was obtained from the University and the Victorian Department of Education respectively. The focus was on public school teachers. In this article I draw data from fourteen teachers working in ten small schools. In accordance with international studies, small schools are defined as schools with less than one hundred student enrolment (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022; Hargreaves, 2009). There were no schools taking part of this project that were one-teacher school. That is, all schools had at least more than one staff and more than one grade. Nine of the fourteen teachers that took part in the interviews worked in a secondary school.

To capture the heterogeneity of teachers' experiences, the research project focused on teachers at different stages of their rural teaching careers: early-career teachers who have been working between one and five years in a rural school; and experienced teachers who have been working for more than five years in a rural school. It is important to note that the majority of interviewees were experienced teachers; that is, with more than five years living and working in a rural area. Only four out of fourteen interviewees were early career teachers (teachers T04, T07, T14, and T16). There was also a gender disparity, with only three interviewees being male (T05, T13, T15). Overall, most interviewees worked in comparatively socio-educational disadvantaged schools. In terms of the socio-educational advantage of the school, this is measured in Australia through the combination of students' parental occupation and school education, the geographical location of the school, and the percentage of Indigenous student enrolment in the school (see ACARA 2020). (An Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is created where below the score of 1000 a student body is deemed socio-educational disadvantaged (ACARA, 2020)). Using ACARA's ICSEA, the majority of interviewees worked in comparatively socioeconomically disadvantaged schools (mean ICSEA value of 970, compared to a country-wide mean of 1000 and based on a standard deviation of 100). It is important to note that while this can be a crude measure of advantage and disadvantage, and often are used to compare students and schools in their national assessments' performances, it was teachers who mentioned the struggles of working in what they perceived was a socio-economic disadvantaged community or a place with few amenities, resources, or professionals (e.g. health) that can support their work and students and families.

In terms of employment, all participants but one (T14) mentioned currently being employed on a permanent contract. Nevertheless, many of them have experienced precarious working conditions and were aware of the challenges of the teaching labour market (see AITSL, 2025 – and below for more details on this issue). Below, Table 1 present some characteristics from teachers and the schools they work in Interestingly, the majority of teachers grew up in rural areas, which is understood can support feelings of belonging to a place and hence, enhance retention (see Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Murphy et al., 2025).

Interview questions revolved around biographical stories of living in a rural area, classroom and school experiences that enabled rural retention, and the participants' relationship to community and place. They took what some scholars label a "life history approach" (see McLeod & Thomson, 2009). Thus, questions asked participants where they grew up, their educational and labour trajectory, and most importantly for this article, a deep reflection of their initial years teaching – as data shows these are critical years for teacher retention with many graduate teachers not being able to sustain an unexpected heavy workload and responsibility that teaching can be (Cuervo, 2012; Department of Education, 2022). In this sense, many of the quotes presented below by more experienced teacher are their reflections of their trajectory as a teacher, including what got them through in their first years of their career.

As mentioned above, in this article we limit the analysis and discussion to classroom and school experiences for these teachers. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants, professionally transcribed and analysed through a thematic analysis of 'a priori' and 'emergent' themes (see Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For example, the 'a priori' codes were constructed from

Table 1
Characteristics of teachers and schools.

Inter-view code	Gender	Grew up rural (Yes / No)	Primary / Secondary school teacher	Career teaching stage *	Number of students in school **	Teaching staff in school ***
T02	Female	No	Secondary	ST	< 100	< 15
T03	Female	Yes	Secondary	ST	< 75	< 10
T04	Female	Yes	Primary	ECT	< 75	< 15
T05	Male	Yes	Secondary	ST	< 75	< 15
T06	Female	No	Primary	ST	< 50	< 10
T07	Female	No	Secondary	ECT	< 75	< 15
T08	Female	Yes	Secondary	ST	< 100	< 15
T09	Female	Yes	Primary	ST	< 50	< 10
T11	Female	Yes	Primary	ST	< 50	< 10
T12	Female	Yes	Primary	ST	< 75	< 10
T13	Male	No	Secondary	ST	< 100	< 20
T14	Female	Yes	Secondary	ECT	< 75	< 15
T15	Male	Yes	Secondary	ST	< 75	< 10
T16	Female	Yes	Secondary	ECT	< 100	< 20

* ECT = early career teacher. ST = senior teacher (also referred in the text as "experienced").

** To avoid a multiplicity of different numbers that can make the table hard to read, I structure school population by quarters (up to 25, 50, 75, 100 students). I stipulate them as <75 (< 75), or <50 (< 50). I followed international literature that refers to small schools as having less than a hundred students. To the best of my knowledge, there is no formal definition in Australian education policy of what constitutes a small school.

*** Same as above, I structure number of teaching staff by multiples of 5 (5, 10, 15, 20 staff. For example, < 20 will mean >15 but <20 staff).

interview questions such as: “what factors encouraged or shaped your decision to stay working in this rural school and living in this rural community”. Teachers were also asked in the interview about “what issues you enjoy the most and the least of teaching in a rural school”. During coding of the data, the ‘a priori’ grouping of responses enabled the exploration for issues, commonalities and differences, and sub-themes. Further, analysing data in relation to the ‘a priori’ codes prompted ideas or issues that were not directly related to the interview questions. These ‘emergent’ ideas or issues became open codes, which represented patterns that arose from interpretation of the data. For instance, teachers’ comments gave way to issues about attraction of graduate teachers to rural areas, job satisfaction with school resources (e.g. professional development, extracurricular activities), poverty and other social issues affecting the community and school, the usefulness of government targeted financial incentives in attraction and retention of staff, collaborating with teachers from other schools, and relationships with students, among other issues. In what follows, I present findings from teachers’ practices and experiences in the classroom and in the whole school.

5. Findings

Teachers interviewed in this study brought to the fore the power of relations between individuals, schools and communities that enhance positive school culture and a robust teacher workforce. Eleven out of the fourteen interviewed teachers affirmed that their relations with students and/or colleagues were the main reason for staying rural. Focusing on classroom and school practices and relationships, most teachers affirmed that they felt a strong sense of duty and care for their students. The centrality of teacher-student relation was a core factor in developing a positive job satisfaction and in their decision to remain working and living in a rural community. This teacher, working in a socioeconomic disadvantaged rural community, when asked why she has stayed for two decades working in the same small school, she responded:

I haven't left this school because it is like a family to me. It means a lot to me. I absolutely love this school. It was not an easy school to work in when I first came here. Probably for the first half of my teaching career, it was really hard place to be, but myself included, have put in a huge amount of work and it is a lovely environment now and I'm really proud of the school that it is. We're a really low socioeconomic school. I feel like that we make a difference to the kids. So a lot of these kids, we are their consistent people in their lives. They can rely on us. They know we care. (T03)

Building relationships over time with students, and their families, through a caring ethics was seen as a core task by teachers in many of these small schools. The affective work carried out by teachers supported students, as well as enhanced their commitment to the school and community. In several schools, teachers affirmed that these relationships provided them with a ‘sense of duty’, a ‘sense of pride’, and purpose to ‘help the kids’. This commitment to students and the community was linked to comments that in some small rural communities, without other professional and institutional service support such as social workers, counsellors, and psychologists, teachers were one of the few professional support options available in town. As this teacher put it: ‘Now you are a father or a mother, a doctor, a nurse. You are about 20 different professions all-in-one now’ (T05).

Teachers also noted that the strong connection with students was related to classroom and school size. Small schools were found to generate a feeling of belonging. They were often praised by teachers as ‘special’ and ‘positive’ spaces and environments to build relationships.

You get to know the kids really well, and not just the kids but the families too. Because we're a small school, I get the privilege of teaching all the kids at some point. (T15)

Teaching in a rural school, I think the close connections that you make with your students. I think also being in a small rural school, you have such an immense sense of pride in what you do and what you can achieve. (T06)

The care relationship is easy to be mistaken as a one-way relation. One in which teachers care for students, particularly in situations as described above where the community is in need of material resources and professional support. A strong factor on teachers’ decision to stay is a feeling of being valued, being seen and recognised by students, the school, and the community.

I stayed because I know that I'm valued here and that the community really value the fact that when kids come here that we do care. (T03)

The thing that I enjoy the most about teaching in a small rural school is the close connections that you make with your students. I think the type of student are different, and this could be an assumption, to Melbourne-based students, I think that there's no pretentiousness is what you get with our students. We care for them and I think they care for us too. (T06)

The feeling of being recognised had also to do with the community being ‘very supportive’ (T11), as a teacher put it; and with ‘parents acknowledge that we go above and beyond to help students’ (T12). Recognition was not only affective but material, as it was linked by teachers to changes in their employment status. This matters because of the increasing precarisation of the Australian and teaching labour market (Cuervo et al., 2023; Department of Education, 2022; O’Keeffe, 2024). Specifically, the labour market for young adults in their twenties and early thirties is dominated by precarious work in the form of fixed-term or casual contracts, and part-time jobs (Waite et al., 2025). In terms of the teaching profession, the reports are concerning with at least a third of teachers and principals working in non-permanent contracts and an increase in the past 3 years in the difficulty to fill in teaching vacancies (AITSL, 2025). Further, other reports affirm that Victorian teachers are some of the worst paid in Australia and that regional and rural teachers are making the journey across the state border to work in other states’ schools that offer better remuneration (Crowe, 2024). Against this backdrop, securing a permanent job in the early stages of your career can signify a recognition to your traits, abilities and

achievements (Honneth, 2014). This early career teacher illustrates this point.

Job security was a really big fear of mine. Having it now, it makes me feel valued and that I'm part of the school and that they want me there. So, not only do I want to be there, but they want me there. And they value my expertise and what I value and everything that I bring to the school, which is really good. (T07)

Feeling valued accounts here for a set of layered affective and material relations of recognition that underpins teachers' identity and solidifies their desire and motivation to stay rural. A final note on these relationships of recognition is the issue that almost no teacher mentioned the support of principals or leadership in the school. It is argued in the literature that principals' support to staff can enhance job satisfaction and retention (see Guenther et al., 2023; Thompson & Stokes, 2024; White et al., 2022). In small schools, the principal often also is a teacher or has teaching duties. A possible explanation for this lack of mentioning of principals could be that they are viewed in a horizontal sense (i.e. as peers) rather than the vertical hierarchical way; and hence are included in these mutuality of support described above.

5.1. Interpersonal and professional relations at school and beyond

Teachers in the interviews also commented on challenges to their profession, their job satisfaction, and to remaining in a school. A significant challenge was the increasing administrative and accountability demands teachers felt were placed on them over the last two decades. One senior teacher stated: 'I have been teaching 20 years and the pressures and demands on teachers are much higher than when I started in the profession' (T02). Another teacher commented about job demands: 'They are always there but never at the level they are now... Paperwork and bureaucracy is just ridiculous' (T12). It is important to state that intensive workload and burden of administrative duties in teaching is not unique to rural schools (Heffernan et al., 2022; Stacey et al., 2023). It is across the spatial spectrum – urban, regional and rural. Indeed, currently full-time school classroom teachers report working long hours during school term (with a median of 50 h per week) (AITSL, 2025). In their biographical career reflection experienced teachers in this study were well aware of the intensification of work and its impact in their everyday work and life.

Across the board senior teachers noted that this increase in administrative work was harder for beginning teachers. They felt that it could be an important factor why early-career teachers do not remain in a rural school and in the profession. One teacher mentioned: 'Beginning teachers are blown away by the workload... I think they're overwhelmed by the enormity of the task' (T09). Another senior teacher affirmed: 'Younger teachers struggle, they really struggle. There's too much admin. It's not just teaching anymore...' (T08).

Against this backdrop, teachers commented that support from colleagues was critical to make space to regain control of their teaching practice. Strong connections with colleagues emerged as a salient factor for rural teacher retention. One teacher felt that colleagues in his 'curriculum area' helped him 'navigate the space'. He added:

Once they know that you can do what you say you do, they "Ooh, let's go and ask Mr. X how he does that." It's really, truly nice to be wanted in that area, so that becomes a really good thing. (T05)

For this teacher the recognition from peers was critical, in his view, for 'staying here'. Other teachers felt that the small size of school enable 'collegiality'. She expanded: 'I think because the schools aren't as big as I know some schools in cities can be, I think there's a bit more collegiality or something, you can do stuff' (T13). This early career teacher had been working in her rural school for approximately three years. Her experience reveals the importance of a positive school culture and supportive colleagues to make it through the challenges of the first years of teaching (see Department of Education, 2022; Simpson et al. 2007).

My first and second years, so straight out of university, I found it really difficult. There were times where I felt I couldn't do this. It was a lot of unknown. I am the youngest teaching staff at work. So, I really struggled. I was crying almost every day. It was really hard. But yeah, we pushed through. But yeah, there were lots and lots of times where I thought I think it would just be easier if I just went back home. What made me stay are the friends and the connections that I made, not only at school but also in the community. But yeah, it was my colleagues essentially, what really pulled me through. (T07)

A common challenge to job satisfaction and to staff retention in small rural schools is 'curriculum loneliness'; that is, not having a colleague to collaborate in the school in your teaching subject area. When teachers reflected on their work in the school as a contributing factor to staying rural, 'curriculum loneliness' was often cited as a challenge. At least, until teachers were able to build 'inter-schools' networks, which often took some time for beginning teachers. As this teacher put it:

I think something with being in a rural school, we kind of get trapped in our little bubble. At the moment I teach two VCE subjects, but two of them are math methods and physics. I'm the only teacher in my school who can teach those subjects. (T14)

Teachers mentioned in the interviews that to redress this 'curriculum loneliness' you need to be 'creative' and 'look for support elsewhere'. In many instances, these rural teachers tended to form clusters or hubs of subject knowledge with teachers from other schools from nearby communities. This early career teacher stated that finding teachers in her subject area in nearby towns provided her with 'support to be creative to expand the curriculum'. She added that this had an impact on her decision to stay rural:

Now that I've had the opportunity to network with other teachers from other schools, particularly in my subject area and my year level, yeah, it's made it so much easier, the sharing of resources, the cross-marking and just checking in with each other. Yeah, it's been a really big important part in the fact that I'm staying in the position that I'm in Without the help, I think I would've thrown the towel in a little bit earlier. (T07)

Interpersonal relationships appear to be key in teachers' decision to stay rural. These relationships are based on care for students' learning and wellbeing, students' recognition of teachers' work, and on support by colleagues in their school and collaboration with colleagues from nearby schools working in their subject area. Most importantly, they are based on solidaristic relations based on a community of shared values. These relationships sediment teachers' professional identity over time and enhance their motivation to stay working and living outside the metropolis.

6. Discussion

Teachers' practices of care and interpersonal relations serve to reaffirm the relevance of social recognition as an important dimension of justice when examining the social dynamic occurring in rural schools. As [Honneth \(2014\)](#) affirms accounts of social justice in the social world have often been fixated with the principles of distribution of resources rather than giving preponderance to generating symmetrical relations of recognition. This study helps redressing this trend.

Symmetrical relations of recognition with students and solidaristic practices with colleagues are key reasons for teachers to stay working and living in a rural area. Indeed, teachers' comments and experiences reveal a strong positive interpersonal relation with students and between staff. Positive social recognition generates a sense of solidarity and satisfaction with a person's job ([Huttunen & Heikkinen, 2004](#)). These robust relationships of recognition and solidarity resonate with the international literature as a positive characteristic found in small rural schools (e.g. [Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2022](#); [Karlberg-Granlund, 2019](#)). The characteristics and structure of small schools enhances interpersonal relations, including a stronger caring ethics ([Raggl, 2015](#)).

In this study, relationships based on an ethics of care are recognised by teachers as a moral interdependent practice situated not just in a private sphere of individual responsibility but placed in the public sphere of schooling and community relations. This is particularly the case in several low socio-economic communities where teachers work and live in As one teacher describes their relationship with students: "we are the consistent people in their lives".

Teachers are recognised and valued by students and the community for their work, signalling what [Noddings \(2007\)](#) view as a true relationship of care – where the carer claims to care and the cared-for acknowledges that the relationship is one of caring (see also [Dadvand, 2024](#)). Following [Honneth \(1995, 2003\)](#), these relationships of care represent a source of esteem and recognition of their professional identity as teachers. The normatively appropriate appreciation from students and families for their work is at the core of teachers' job satisfaction. Everyday caring relationships offer teachers the validation that they are taking the right steps in their profession and are worthy of the esteem of their peers, students and the community ([Zhang et al., 2023](#)). Echoing Honneth, it is from their interactions with and recognition from others (e.g. students and colleagues) that teachers construct and sustain a positive relation with their self which constitutes their professional identity, enabling their job satisfaction and their self-realisation in their own social milieu. Through this recognition, teachers are able to answer the question of 'what am I?' – and hence, enhancing their professional identity as a teacher.

Often studies linking Honneth's third form of struggle for recognition to teachers' work indicate that social esteem is associated to teaching and professional capabilities (e.g. [Zhang et al., 2023](#)). Recognition at work is used as a way to motivate teachers to achieve established organizational performances, where rewards are often material and financial. In this study it is the affective side of teaching through a caring ethics that generates the social recognition for teachers for their everyday contribution at school. This does not mean that other teaching capacities are not valued by students and families or that material and financial reward is not important for any worker. However, it is interesting that teachers choose relationships of care and reciprocity as a core factor that signals recognition of their work and as a main reason of why they stay rural. Echoing other studies on teaching and recognition theory, the social recognition that teachers receive from students (and also colleagues) generates a solidarity within the school that contributes to satisfaction at work ([Huttunen & Heikkinen, 2004](#)). That is, these practices of mutuality enhanced teachers' job satisfaction and teacher retention in most of these schools.

According to [Honneth \(1995\)](#), societal conflicts are originated in the disrespect individuals receive from others. Solving these conflicts involves actions that promote mutual recognition between individuals. This intersubjectivity is key in the process of individuation for each member of society. This includes teachers, whose professional identity has been put into question and challenged systematically over the past few decades ([Baroutsis, 2019](#); [Mockler, 2022](#)). Indeed, in current times when teachers feel they are undervalued by social institutions and society ([Fray et al., 2023](#); [Heffernan et al., 2022](#); [Mockler, 2022](#)), teaching in small schools reveals that through robust interpersonal relations teachers receive a recognition from others which serves as constitutive of their professional identity. For example, teachers state they felt "valued", "cared for", "acknowledged" by students for their work.

This social recognition is also present in their relationship with school staff. The support from colleagues in their school has a positive impact in job satisfaction and teacher retention. This is particularly so for early-career staff, making their first experience within an environment that all teachers describe as of excessive administrative work and demands. While the excessive administrative tasks could undermine job satisfaction, it appears this is counterbalanced by the positive relations and solidaristic practices built in the school. Further, these relations of symmetrical recognition enhanced the process of individuation for teachers – a process that recognises their moral autonomy as individuals and as members of a community.

In this study, teachers' daily interactions with others serve to construct a healthy self-esteem that all individuals need for their self-realisation ([Honneth, 1995, 2003](#)). This provides a motivation to remain in a rural school despite facing challenges (e.g. lack of services in small schools and towns, bureaucratisation of teaching). Following Honneth's esteem-based recognition, teachers' identity, traits and achievements are recognised and reaffirmed by others, including colleagues, through a social valuing that involves scalar judgments of value of their work and that provides a sense of worth. For Honneth an individual can develop a healthy sense of themselves when these forms of recognition are granted to them. In this study, the social recognition provided by students and other teachers is

important for participants' development of their self-esteem and their professional identity. This resonates with other research that has measured teacher recognition and teacher identity through a recognition theory approach, and which found that colleagues' support enhances it (see Zhang et al., 2023).

The literature on rural small schools links curriculum innovation, including developing place-based knowledge, with positive job satisfaction and teacher retention (Hargreaves, 2009; Roberts, 2013). In this study, classroom and teaching innovation did not feature in teachers' comments. (This does not mean they do not practice it but just that interviewed teachers did not mention it.) The possibility of putting into practice their expertise and thus further their teacher identity is related to the work they did with colleagues from nearby schools but not within their schools. This association with teachers from nearby towns to combat "curriculum loneliness" and collaborate in common subject areas is also linked to a positive job satisfaction and decision to stay rural. Here obtaining recognition through curriculum collaboration from other teachers outside their schools is intrinsically connected to developing a healthy sense of self and a professional identity (Honneth, 2003).

Ultimately, participants in this study build relationships of solidarity through the normative appropriate regard of students, school colleagues and teachers from nearby schools, to form a community of shared values. Echoing Honneth's (1995) struggle for recognition, we can identify how and to what extent teachers achieve their job satisfaction, reinforce their commitment to rural teaching and view themselves as valuable members of a solidaristic community.

7. Conclusion

This article links a perennial issue in rural education, teacher retention, to job satisfaction and the power of small schools through a theory of recognition approach. This article moves the agenda of social justice rural teaching retention from a fixation with distribution of resources to symmetrical relations of recognition. Too often in education policy, rural teacher attraction and attrition has been addressed through material and financial rewards. Less attention has been paid to relationships of mutual recognition between school actors – teachers, students, principals, and parents – that enable the constitution of the professional identity of teachers. In this study, esteem and respect for teachers' professional work and identity in the school and community reveals the development of a positive job satisfaction that addresses the problem of staff attrition. Echoing Honneth, the social recognition gained by teachers is closely linked to developing a healthy sense-of-self – as moral beings, teachers and members of a rural community.

In this study, teachers gained a sense of purpose through the appreciation by students for their strong caring ethics, support and recognition from school staff, and collaboration with teachers from other schools. Symmetrical relations of social recognition built a valorisation of teachers' work that contributed to a healthy sense-of-self and a positive professional identity. These relations of social recognition are enhanced by the characteristics of small schools. As job satisfaction is rooted in interpersonal relations of social recognition, so is teacher retention. Ultimately, the study shows that small schools have a place in rural education and teacher retention, and that satisfaction with teaching is shaped by interpersonal relations of recognition with other school actors.

Finally, it is important to state that the small sample of teachers interviewed in this study precludes any generalisation of the findings to the broad cohort of rural teachers in Australia and internationally. It is not the point in this article to claim universal representation. The point, as mentioned above, is to shed light to an important factor that might be considered by rural school communities and policymakers when thinking about staff retention: the power of symmetrical relations of recognition. These relationships are enhanced by the characteristics and structure of small schools. Other factors might well contribute to job satisfaction, staff wellbeing and retention – such as a sense of belonging to a rural area, including having grown up in it, community amenities and services, and the satisfaction of teachers' families with the area and their everyday life. Nonetheless, this study shows that against challenges to job satisfaction and retention (e.g. intensive workload, professional isolation), everyday practices of recognition that cement teachers' identity and purpose in a small school can go a long way in keeping them rural.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hernan Cuervo: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Statement of declaration

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