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Reframing the Policy Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Teacher Preparation for Rural and Remote Education in Australia, South Africa, and Mexico

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Abstract: The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has highlighted a 'vicious cycle of decline' in rural, regional and remote (RRR) regions, with significant inequalities in educational outcomes between rural and urban areas. However, interventions have not resulted in transformative or lasting improvements to education in rural contexts. This paper presents a cross-comparative country analysis of current global policy on RRR education. We used a policy analysis framework to interrogate national policy texts concerning teacher education for RRR contexts in three countries - Australia, South Africa and

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Mexico. A rigorous selection process of the literature yielded 17 key policy texts, which were examined for the influences, practices, language and outcomes relating to teacher education preparation for RRR locales. Findings highlighted a legacy of historical influences and a metrocentric bias in policy texts, with limited examples of assets-based education. We argue that these factors may be perpetuating the significant and persistent disadvantage in RRR education. We recommend an alternative policy discourse that recognises the productivities and potentialities of an assets-based approach within the local context, where school leaders and teachers are positioned as central change agents in RRR education.
Keywords: rural education; teacher education; school leadership; comparative policy analysis

Encuadre del discurso político: Análisis comparativo de la preparación docente para la educación rural y remota en Australia, Sudáfrica y México
Resumen: La Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos DPI ha identificado importantes desigualdades en los resultados educativos entre las zonas rurales y urbanas, y en particular, un "círculo vicioso de declive" en las regiones rurales, regionales y remotas (RRR), donde las intervenciones educativas no han tenido como resultado mejoras transformadoras o duraderas en contextos rurales. El presente estudio es un análisis comparativo cruzado de países de la política global actual sobre educación RRR, para su elaboración utilizamos un marco de análisis de políticas para interrogar los textos de políticas nacionales relacionados con la formación docente para contextos de RRR en tres países: Australia, Sudáfrica y México. El estudio empleó un riguroso proceso de selección de la literatura, basado en 17 textos de políticas educativas clave en dichos países, que fueron examinados en busca de influencias, prácticas, lenguaje y resultados relacionados con la preparación de la formación docente para los contextos educativos de RRR. Entre los hallazgos destaca un legado de influencias históricas y un sesgo metrocéntrico en las políticas educativas de los países estudiados, con ejemplos limitados de educación basada actividad directa. Argumentamos que estos factores pueden estar perpetuando la desventaja significativa y persistente en la educación RRR. Recomendamos un discurso político alternativo que reconozca las productividades y potencialidades de un enfoque basado en la actividad directa dentro del contexto local, donde los líderes escolares y los maestros se posicionan como agentes centrales de cambio en la educación RRR.
Palabras-clave: educación rural; formación docente; liderazgo escolar; análisis comparativo de políticas

Reformulando o discurso político: Uma análise comparativa da preparação de professores para a educação rural e remota na Austrália, África do Sul e México
Resumo: A Organização para Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Econômico ECD destacou um 'ciclo vicioso de declínio' em regiões rurais, regionais e remotas (RRR), com desigualdades significativas nos resultados educacionais entre as áreas rurais e urbanas. Da mesma forma, este estudo, inquiriu as intervenções e melhorias educacionais em contextos rurais, o artigo representa uma análise comparativa em três países: Austrália, África do Sul e México, com foco em educação em RRR. Usamos uma estrutura analítica das políticas educacionais em textos relativos à formação de professores para contextos RRR, baseado em um rigoroso processo de seleção da literatura em 17 documentos nacionais chave, examinados quanto às influências, práticas, linguagem e resultados relacionados à preparação da formação de professores para locais RRR. Os resultados destacaram um legado de influências históricas e um viés metrocêntrico em textos de políticas, com exceções relevantes de educação baseada em atividade direta nos contextos. Argumentamos que esses fatores podem estar perpetuando a desvantagem significativa e persistente na educação RRR. Recomendamos um discurso político educacional alternativo que reconheça as potencialidades da atividade direta no contexto local, onde líderes escolares e professores estão posicionados como agentes de transformação na educação RRR.

Palavras-chave: educação rural; formação de professores; liderança escolar; análise comparativa de políticas

Reframing the Policy Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Teacher Preparation for Rural and Remote Education in Australia, South Africa, and Mexico

Trends in urban growth have seen regional attractiveness decrease and a shrinking rural, regional and remote (RRR) population with declining opportunities for development, investment and access to services in RRR contexts (OECD, 2018). The OECD's strategic framework highlighted the need to improve RRR education, stating that "access to high quality education is a right for every child and a cornerstone for social and economic sustainability" (OECD, 2016b, p.10).

The OECD has highlighted and defined a 'vicious cycle of decline' in rural and remote regions, with significant inequalities between rural and urban areas in quantitative measures such as educational attainment, teacher experience and qualifications, access to pre-primary education, and the percentage of graduating students (OECD, 2016b, p. 10). Results from the OECD's Programme for International Assessment (PISA) showed that for the majority of OECD countries, the proportion of low-achieving 15-year-old students was far greater in rural populations as compared with urban students (OECD, 2018). Yet, in many countries regional areas are key centres of economic growth, mobility and industry (RIA, 2020), thus the need to provide quality education lies at the heart of RRR community success (Trinidad et al., 2014), and indeed, at the centre of national economic productivity and innovation (OECD, 2018).

Rural communities are however, plagued by what often appears to be insurmountable challenges in their education system, with many interventions not resulting in real or lasting transformation (Ledger & Vidovich, 2018; Reid, 2017). Transformative and lasting change in RRR is difficult to achieve, and researchers have argued that change is often hindered by policy directives that reflect a predominantly metrocentric discourse that do not acknowledge the contextual needs of RRR contexts (Bolaji et al., 2015; Ledger & Vidovich, 2018; Reid, 2017). In addition, there is concern that the constant negativity associated with RRR policy discourse may have the potential to permeate society and normalize disadvantage in these areas (Ledger & Vidovich, 2018).

While there is a substantial body of literature on the challenges that exist in RRR education (see for example, Cuervo, 2016; Halsey, 2018; Roberts, 2016), less is understood about the impact of metrocentric policy discourse on RRR education and the polices and practices that may be contributing to a widening gap between urban and rural education (Braun et al., 2011). In particular, the policy discourse that informs the preparation of teachers for RRR contexts is not well described in the context of rural education.

In this article, we examine the policy discourse for RRR education across three diverse nations and present a comparative case study that interrogates the policy texts concerning the preparation of teachers for RRR contexts across Australia, South Africa and Mexico. These nations are independent of each other and remain as policy case studies in their own right; however, the authors have selected these three nations as case examples, in order "to align strategically smaller-scale studies that when analysed and viewed together will highlight common themes, as well as shine a light on diversity and context relevant matters" (White et al., 2017, p. vii).

These global south nations form the contextual cases for this comparative study, providing a lens through which to explore RRR policy, and in particular, the policy discourse and practices that may be contributing to the widening division between rural and urban education (Bolaji et al., 2015).

Context

Contextual Influences on RRR Education

Australia, South Africa and Mexico differ markedly with respect to country size, population and economic strength; however, the three countries share a common movement towards the standardisation of education and development of a national curriculum. Fuelled largely by the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) in the 1980s and 1990s (Sahlberg, 2012), neoliberal reforms have dominated the large-scale efforts toward educational reform. However, RRR education has remained largely underrepresented among policy directives (Ledger & Vidovich, 2018), and a widening gap continues to exist between rural and urban achievement in both developed and developing nations (OECD, 2018). In the following section, we briefly examine the literature on the contextual influences and the policy texts informing teacher preparation for RRR education, across Australia, South Africa and Mexico.

Australia

Australia is characterised by a decentralized environment with seven states and territories recently adopting a new national curriculum that reflects a standardization agenda of measurable outcomes, high performance and accountability (OECD, 2018; Sahlberg, 2012), resulting in a National Curriculum, National Professional Standards for Teachers, National Program Standards for Initial Teacher Education and the National Registration for Teachers (Ledger & Vidovich, 2018). Strategic efforts to raise the quality of teachers and school leadership in urban and rural Australia led to the creation of the *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership* (AITSL) and subsequent publication of the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2017), have formed the basis for an accountability system in schools and initial teacher education programs across Australia.

Although government efforts have emphasised accountability and quality, RRR is often overlooked in terms of educational research, planning and investment (Cuervo, 2016; Ledger & Vidovich, 2018). In terms of money spent per school student, Australia is the OECD's 10th biggest spender (OECD, 2018), yet for the 32% of Australian residents who live in rural and remote areas, educational outcomes are significantly lower in rural than urban areas. As Sullivan, McConney and Perry (2018) noted:

> Nearly 2 decades ago in Australia, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000) found that rural schooling was inferior on every indicator included in its study. Indeed, among developed countries, Australia has one of the largest urban/rural achievement gaps in PISA (OECD, 2013), and students in rural Australia have long been identified as educationally disadvantaged (p. 1).

Thus, despite the current reform agenda and push toward nationally agreed goals for education, achievement levels of rural students are significantly lower than their urban counterparts, confirming the concerns raised by Reid (2017) who described the "persistent and entrenched disadvantage" of those living in RRR contexts (p. 88).

South Africa

Approximately 40% of the South African population live in rural and remote areas (World Bank, 2014). This high figure is explained in part by the massification of educational provision after South Africa declared independence (Mukeredzi, 2013). The legacy of South African apartheid continues to be reflected in a severe teacher shortage that exists in RRR schools and the mass of impoverished and rundown rural schools (Moletsane, 2012).

Although South Africa spends more of its gross domestic product on education than any other country in Africa, PISA rankings indicate that South Africa has lower performance levels than surrounding countries in the region (OECD, 2018). Rural education in South Africa has

been described as having very low levels of accountability, poorly performing teachers and a lack of support for principals and teachers. Many unqualified teachers are employed to fill the shortage in rural centres. Educational resources and infrastructure also vary considerably with 30% of public schools reporting no running water and nearly 80% of schools reporting no libraries or computers (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

There is a significant disparity between rural-urban student attainment levels, where in 2015, 41% of sixth-grade students in rural schools were reportedly functionally illiterate when compared with 13% of their urban counterparts. The fact that South Africa has 11 official languages further complicates matters, and achievement at the secondary level varies widely by province (Spaull, 2013).

The OECD economic policy reform program *Going for Growth 2018* recommended that South Africa "raise efficiency and equity in education by improving teacher training, enhance accountability and increase monitoring of school leadership" (OECD, 2018, p. 8). Policy initiatives developed in response to these recommendations include the *Department of Basic Education's Social Cohesion Toolkit*, the *Education Sector Action Plan 2011-2014* and *Schooling 2025 policy initiative*; however, the aims of these policy directives have not yet been realised in practice.

Mexico

Mexico's performance in the PISA tests for 15-year-old students is low when compared with similar OECD countries (OECD, 2018). A key challenge for rural education in Mexico is the coverage and quality of education, where approximately 30% of students are from a socio-economically disadvantaged background and almost a quarter of teachers reported that they did not feel prepared to teach students of these backgrounds (OECD, 2018, p. 4). Public Education in RRR contexts often operate within the poorest and most challenging social and economic conditions (Agostinelli et al., 2020), facing pronounced challenges, including low expectations, unequal work opportunities and unequal educational outcomes (San Martín, 2009).

In response to OECD recommendations, Mexico's education system underwent a major reform across all sectors, with an influx of policy directives including the *Education Model for Mandatory Education* which stated access to quality education as a right for all Mexicans. *Profile, Parameters and Indicators for Teachers* outlined the selection, promotion, tenure and teacher appraisal and education. Guidelines included at the *General Law of the Professional Education Service* (DOF, 2013) aimed to professionalise school leaders with clear recruitment, induction and promotional processes and related with the *Program for Inclusion and Education Equity* (Gobierno de México, 2019) developed to strengthen the capacity of schools, teachers and education services to serve Indigenous child migrants and students with special educational needs. However, to date, the aims and intentions of these programs have not yet been fully realised (Hrusa et al., 2020)

In summary, many contextual influences inform RRR education across Australia, South Africa and Mexico, including global movements toward accountability, effectiveness and standardization of school-based programs. However, these movements have not resulted in transformative or lasting change in RRR education.

In this study, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of the highly contextualized nature of RRR education and highlight the potential of reframing the policy discourse in terms of the inherent productivities and potentialities embedded in the local context (Masinire et al., 2014). Using Australia, South Africa and Mexico as case examples, we aim to highlight examples of practice where school leaders and teachers are positioned as instrumental to the success of RRR contexts, and where school leaders are seen as change agents that can disrupt the "persistent and entrenched locational disadvantaged" at a local level (Reid, 2017 p. 88). We show the importance of recognising the local context in the enactment of RRR policy, and conclude with insights into the country specific policy-practice nexus related to preparing teachers and school leaders for rural, regional and remote contexts.

This study aimed to address three research questions:

1. What are the key *policy texts* relating to the preparation of teachers and school leaders to work in RRR locations in Australia, South Africa and Mexico?
2. What is the *language* used in policy texts to portray RRR education in Australia, South Africa and Mexico?
3. Is there evidence of RRR *policy initiatives* in Australia, Mexico and South Africa, that highlight innovative asset-based, educational practices?

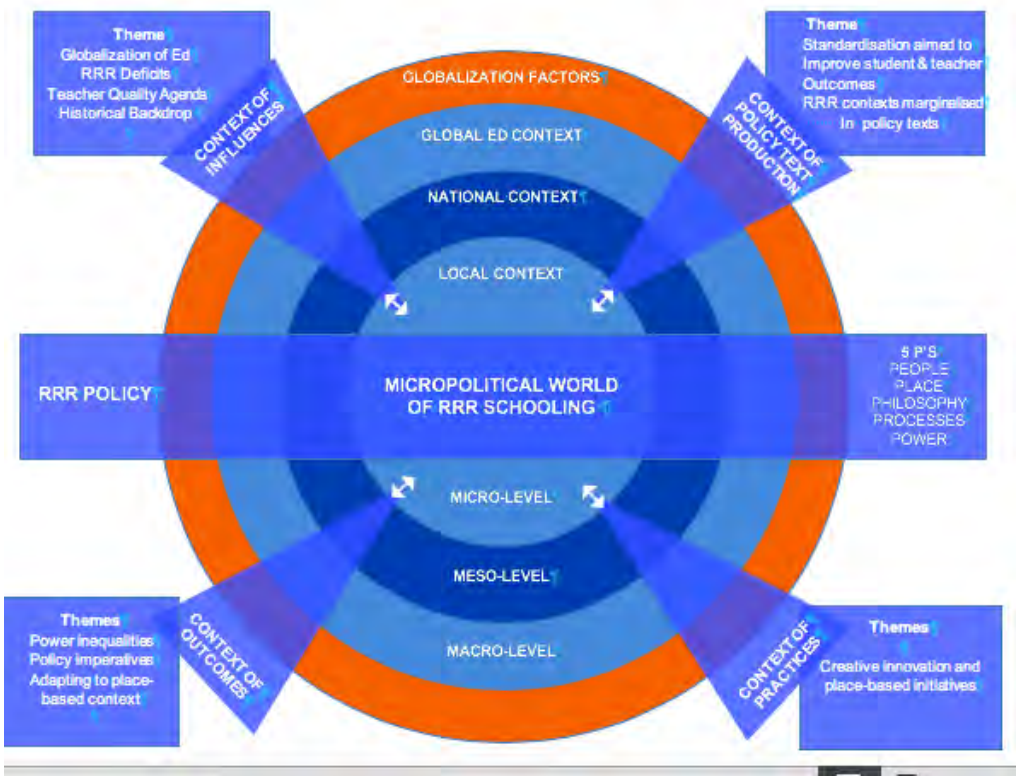
Method

This research is qualitative in approach and situated as a policy analysis study (Patton et al., 2016). We examined national policy texts across three diverse countries (Australia, South Africa, Mexico) to identify the influences, practices, language and outcomes related to the preparation of teachers for RRR contexts. Methodologically, many policy analysts or practitioners advocate the integration of scientific technical approaches with normative political approaches, to counter concerns over rational models of policy analysis (Patton et al., 2016). As such, this study combines both scientific and normative approaches in a policy trajectory approach, as outlined below (Ledger et al., 2017).

The approach to policy analysis used in the present study was originally expressed by Ball (1993, 2012) and Vidovich (2007, 2013), and more recently, developed by Ledger, Vidovich & O'Donoghue (2015). A visual representation of the framework (Figure 1) reflects the conceptualisation of the policy analysis (Ledger et al., 2015) and this framework guides the analysis that follows.

Figure 1

Framework for the RRR Policy Analysis (Ledger, et al., 2017).



The conceptual underpinnings of the diagram (Fig. 1) reflect Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social-ecological model that includes global, national and local contexts (concentric circles), and Ball's (1993) conceptualisation of policy contexts that include: influence, policy texts, practices and outcomes (diagonal blades). Empirical research by Ledger et al (2015) identified key enablers and constraints along the policy trajectory and classified these in terms of people, place, philosophy, processes and power (the '5Ps') (horizontal bar). The perimeter boxes reflect the themes that emerged across the analysis of each element investigated for each country. An important feature of the framework is that it captures the interconnectedness of the policy processes and highlights the interconnectivity of processes across levels, contexts and the '5Ps'.

The systematic approach to policy analysis embedded in the framework (Fig. 1) addresses the recommendations put forward by Patton et al. (2016): "a good policy analysis addresses an important problem in a logical, valid, replicable manner, and provides information that can be used by decision makers in adopting economically viable, technically feasible, ethical, and politically acceptable policies that will resolve public issues" (p. 24).

Data Collection

To identify and locate the relevant policy texts and literature, we used the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA) which involved four key phases in the literature search: Identification, Screening, Eligibility and Included **(**Moher et al., 2009).

(i) **Identification.** A literature search was undertaken to identify the key policy documents associated with the influences, practices, language and outcomes concerning the preparation of for RRR education in Australia, South Africa and Mexico (concentric circles, Fig. 1). Using a number of different search engines and databases including Google scholar, ERIC and ProQuest, we conducted a search for all government and annual reports, policy texts, subsidiary policy documents and peer reviewed journals published between 2000-2019. Using the same search engines, we also conducted a comprehensive search for the literature on RRR education, initial teacher education for RRR contexts, cross-country comparative studies, and policy analysis.

(ii) **Screening.** Screening for inclusions and exclusions was conducted, based on the chosen time frame and types of documents. Titles and abstracts of the policy documents relating to Australia, South Africa and Mexico were screened by the author located in that country for the policy influences relating to the preparation of teachers and school leaders across Australia, South Africa and Mexico (diagonal blades, Fig. 1). Peer-reviewed journals, government reports, State-based policy texts and publications produced by the OECD focusing on RRR contexts were included, whilst studies that described RRR in primary and secondary contexts, as well as broader educational contexts in urban areas were excluded.

(iii) **Eligibility.** The remaining articles pertaining to Australia, South Africa and Mexico were read in full by the author located in that country to determine eligibility. Each article was examined individually by the author located in that country, who identified the influences, practices, language and outcomes presented in the policy documents, government documents and research articles.

(iv) **Included.** We then used a process of discussion and collaboration to validate the inclusion process of the selected articles and policy documents.

Following this review process, a total of 17 key policy documents were included, see Table 1.

Table 1

Policy Documents included in this Study

Australia	**South Africa**	**Mexico**
Smarter Schools National Partnership Strategy (2008)	Ministerial Commission into Rural Education (2005)	The National Institute for Education Evaluation (2013)
A National Early Childhood Development Strategy (2009)	Schooling 2025 policy initiative (2010)	Educational Reform of Mexico (*Reforma Educativa en México*) (2013)
National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality (2012)	Education Sector Action Plan 2011-2014	General law of the Professional Education Service (DOF, 2013)
DEEWR Annual Report 2012-13 (Program 2.8 Smarter Schools - Low Socio-economic Status School Communities National partnership)	National Planning Commission's National Development Plan: Vision for 2030 (2018)	Programme for Inclusion and Educational Equity (*Programa para la Inclusión y la Equidad Educativa*) (2014)
Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers (2014)	Social Cohesion Toolkit: Equity in Education (Department Basic Education) (2018)	National Institute for Education Evaluation (*Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación*, INEE) (2015)
		National Strategy for Continuous Training of Teachers (*Estrategia Nacional para la Formación Continua Docente*) (2016)
		Profile, Parameters and Indicators for Teachers (*Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP) (2018)

Data Analysis

There was a phased approach to the data analysis. First, to locate the relevant policy texts and literature, the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2009) was used for Identification, Screening, Eligibility and Inclusions. We then used the qualitative methodology of content analysis to analyse the policy documents meeting the selection criteria outlined above (Graneheim et al., 2017). The country-specific documents included in this study (Table 1) were read in their entirety by the author located in that country who extracted information on the influences, policies, languages and outcomes relevant to their country (Fig 1., diagonal blades).

Next, data was extracted from policy documents according to the '5Ps' (people, place, philosophy, processes and power) outlined in the 'policy trajectory' framework (Fig 1., horizontal lines). Information gathered from this analysis were stored in Excel spreadsheets and used to categorise information and distil the key elements of each article.

The validity and reliability of the data analysis process was enhanced by a process of discussion and collaboration among the authors, where there was agreement among the authors

that the articles collected were reliable and the data gathered from each article was an accurate reflection of the content posed in each article.

Findings

The findings that follow are presented in four sections and reflect the research questions derived from the 'policy trajectory' framework above in relation to the three case study countries: (i) policy texts relating to teacher preparation, (ii) policy language and (iii) policy in action (outcomes). Triangulation of the comparative data is presented thereafter and leads into points for discussion and recommendations.

Research question 1: What are the key *policy texts* relating to the preparation of teachers and school leaders to work in RRR locations in Australia, South Africa and Mexico?

Initial teacher education across Australia, South Africa and Mexico offer programs of similar length, including a four-year undergraduate Bachelor of Education degree and two-year graduate Master of Teaching. Australian universities also offer a Graduate Diploma of Teaching as well as an upskilling Graduate Certificate (Early Childhood Education, Primary and Secondary). South African and Mexico universities offer a similar range of programs, including an Honours year attached to the Bachelor of Education.

Whilst the length and duration of the teacher education programs are largely similar across the countries, there are notable differences across the countries in terms of the preparation of teachers for RRR contexts. Table 2 provides an overview of the teacher education programs and the preparation of teachers and school leaders for RRR education for each country under investigation, and these themes are briefly discussed below.

Table 2

Teacher Education Preparation for RRR Contexts

Country	Teacher Education Program	RRR focus
Australia	Bachelor of Education (4 year) Master of Education/Graduate Diploma (Teaching) Upskilling Graduate Certificate (Early Childhood Education, Primary, Secondary)	A minority of pre-service education is directed to RRR teaching Online programs have increased access for some students
South Africa	Bachelor of Education (4 year) Bachelor of Education (Honours, 1 year) Master of Education (2 year)	Practicum must give prospective teachers experience in RRR education Most rural schools staffed with underqualified and/or ageing teachers
Mexico	Bachelor of Education (4 year)	There is no differentiation for RRR contexts nor any specified quality standard in teacher education programs

Australia

In Australia, efforts to improve teacher quality in RRR areas and low socio-economic school communities was initiated by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG; 2008). A series of government initiatives collectively known as *Smarter Schools National Partnerships* (SSNP) contributed to reform targets aimed at increasing participation and productivity in disadvantaged areas. Similarly, the National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality Program (NPTQ) provided a multi-lateral framework aimed at improving teacher quality in Australia (COAG, 2008). Online teacher education programs have been promoted as one way of meeting policy directives in addressing teacher training for RRR contexts, and while online teacher education programs have almost doubled in the last decade in Australia, these programs have also been associated with lower completion rates and poor student engagement.

In 2017, the Australian government called for an independent review of RRR education to explore the "issues, challenges and barriers that impact on the learning outcomes of RRR students and to identify innovative and fresh approaches to support improved access and achievement of these students" (Halsey, 2018). The recommendations and subsequent government response have raised the importance of RRR issues at a national level and policy changes for education are beginning to be actioned, which have included creating incentives for placements in higher education for RRR students and financial assistance for those returning to RRR areas to teach.

Despite these policy efforts at a national level, only a minority of the thirty-nine ITE providers deliver programs that specifically target teaching in RRR contexts, and even fewer ITE providers offer upskilling programs for Australian Indigenous Education (Kline et al., 2013).

South Africa

In South Africa, current legislation governing the provision of preservice teacher education stipulates that teacher education programs must include teaching practicums that expose prospective teachers to both urban well-resourced schools as well as rural or township disadvantaged schools (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015).

To qualify with a teaching degree in South Africa, prospective teachers must achieve a minimum of four years pre-service training at a recognized higher education institution (DHET, 2015). However, despite official requirements, rural schools are still staffed with underqualified and/or ageing teachers who have been trained in rural colleges established in 1994 to "serve the needs of a specific geography, race and ethnicity" (Islam, 2012, p. 20).

To address the challenges of rural education, the Department of Education established a Ministerial Commission into Rural Education (MCRE), which aimed at facilitating pre-service practicums in rural areas (Department of Education, 2005 p. 44). However, to date, teacher education institutions have been slow to respond to the challenges and there are no institutionalized teacher education programs for RRR in South Africa, with only a minority of operational rural oriented teacher education projects in universities.

Thus, despite the incisive conceptualization of rurality evident in policy and research with concomitant implications for rural teacher education, teacher education graduates nevertheless qualify with an aversion for rural teaching. As a result, metrocentric and urban experiences have prevailed in South African teacher education (Masinire, 2015).

Mexico

Under the guidelines of Mexican federal legislation (2013 to 2019), pre-service teachers are required to meet the requirements of a public selection process as part of a recent push for standards-based education. This new appraisal system provided impetus for the *National Institute for Education Evaluation* and the *National Plan for Learning Assessment*. However, in practice, "over half of the teachers appraised in 2015 obtained insufficient or sufficient, which makes it important for Mexico to continue with the full implementation of the reform, rewarding the

merit of teachers who do well in their job, and providing support for those in need" (OECD, 2018, p.16).

The model for initial teacher education in Mexico originates from the French 19th century system of *Normal Schools*, and in 2013, education reform saw the governance in the national education system of *Normal Schools* regulated by the National Constitution, *Professional Teacher Service Law*. Federal programs designate the economic resources for *Normal Schools* through their participation in federal initiatives. As Rojas (2013) stated, "The Normal School as a teacher-training institution has been clearly subject to the decisions of the State, in particular the federal executive, regarding its objectives, functions, institutional projects, curricula, academic plan and school enrolment" (p. 82). Similarly, Cruz (2013) noted that Normal Schools continue to operate within national higher education institutions and aim "to contribute to improving institutional and academic working conditions" (p. 58). Education Reform in 2013 permitted all graduate aspirants to apply for teaching positions, not just those from Normal Schools that include both Urban Normal Schools (UNS) and Rural Normal Schools (RNS).

Regulation of teaching qualifications are guided by educational reforms stated in the *Profile, Parameters and Indicators for Teachers* (Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), 2018). Teacher graduates must sit a mandatory examination before choosing one of the positions announced by the State education authorities. Once accepted, graduates spend two years under evaluation by officials of the education system, and once endorsed, are required to complete an examination every five years thereafter to maintain their position.

Educational reform in 2020 aimed to address the coercive effects and standardization brought by previous reform, emphasising an apparent 'social justice reference' with an explicit focus on equality in RRR education. The *National Strategy for Continuous Training of Teachers* (SEP, 2018) was subsequently introduced, with the aim of improving primary and upper secondary education, providing teachers with over 500 modular, distance or onsite modules to access. However, Mexican teaching qualifications are homogenised all over the Republic and there is no differentiation for RRR contexts nor any specified quality standard.

In summary, we have seen that across Australia, South Africa and Mexico, the suite of policy texts relating to the preparation of teachers for RRR contexts are positioned within a broader context of standardization and accountability; however, these goals have not been realised in practice with minimal evidence of long-lasting improvements to RRR education.

Research question 2. What is the *language* used in policy texts to portray RRR education in Australia, South Africa and Mexico?

This section examines the language used in the policy text production for RRR education. A summary of the key language features embedded in national policy texts are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Language Used to Portray RRR in Policy Documents

Country	National Context	Local Context
Australia	National move to a global and inclusive outlook	QLD – 'rural' stated as outcome in strategic plan VIC – 'rural' referred to as digital access, vocational education and early childhood education NSW – 'rural' in context of post-secondary students Four of seven states did not mention RRR contexts
South Africa	Language reflects move to urbanize rural schools	Stark differences between urban and rural; material inequalities Rural stated in opposition to urban as 'other' or 'binary' terms, embedded in colonial and deficit thinking

Table 3 cont.

Language Used to Portray RRR in Policy Documents

Country	National Context	Local Context
Mexico	A 'struggling discourse' The 'official discourse' rooted in patriotism	*Urban Normal Schools* and *Teaching Quality Practice* reflect a pragmatic position where efficiency and efficacy for results is valued over long term well-being. Local scholars advocate for community-based practices based on social justice discourse

Australia

Previous studies on the language and discourse embedded in Australian policy documents have highlighted a silence and deficit in policy documents around RRR, where only three of the seven state policy documents mentioned rural, regional, remote or even geographical location (White et al., 2017). State policy documents mention distance education and Indigenous education; however, they do not mention this in terms of regional, rural or remote education. For example, documents from the Northern Territory states the importance of giving every child the opportunity to 'engage, grow and achieve', and similarly, in Western Australia, education is aimed to be inclusive, for students 'whatever their ability, wherever they live, whatever their background' (White et al., 2017).

However, whilst these goals for education are admirable, across policy texts there is little acknowledgment of the local context of RRR education. Comber (2015), for example, outlined the importance of the history, geography, economics and cultures that produce the 'rural social spaces' that leaders, teachers and students inhabit. These social spaces have the ability to constrain or enable successful implementation of policy, yet little acknowledgement of these factors is currently included within Australian state policy documents.

South Africa

The dominant policy discourse on rural education in South Africa is one that positions the rural in opposition to the urban, where portrayal of the rural is described as what is 'not urban' (Rusznyak & Masinire, 2018). Similarly, schools were labelled typically as black or white. This dichotomised discourse still persists in current policy documentation, as noted in previous studies where we trace this depiction of the rural/urban dichotomy from colonialism and where through systematic legislative policy the 'Other' was constructed and sustained (Masinire, 2019).

The foundation of deficit thinking about African education and rural education in particular was constructed and consolidated during the colonial/apartheid period prior to 1994. During this period, rural education was characterized by a rapid structural deterioration of predominantly Black schools and a segregated curriculum. As noted in the *Education Policy in British Tropical Africa* (1925), the educational neglect of African schooling was in line with the British colonial education policy which aimed to ensure minimal or no financial burden for the imperial master (Masinire, 2020).

The difference between black and white/urban and rural schools was not just a policy matter, but rather manifested materially into gross inequalities in terms of teacher qualifications, teacher-student ratios, equipment and facilities. More than two and a half decades after the fall of apartheid, the urban-rural educational inequalities still persist in South Africa and remain largely unaffected by the injection of huge capital inflows from the government (Moletsane, 2012).

The government's commitment to rural education and subsequent implementation of programs such as *Reconstruction and Development Program*, *The Rural Development Strategies of the Reconstruction and Development Program* and the *Growth, Employment and Redistribution Program* (GEAR) aimed to redress rural marginalization and disadvantage. However, the focus of these

policies was largely focussed on urbanizing rural schools, by making them catch up and match urban standards with respect to attendance, enrolments and performance (see for example, The Nelson Mandela Foundation Report, 2005).

Education policies designed and implemented between 1994 to 2004 were largely reflective of a 'one-size-fits-all' policy approach. Masinire (2015) argued that this 'broad-brush' policy approach was based on erroneous assumptions of homogeneity and poverty in South Africa, that failed to reach the most deprived communities in the country and effect any long-lasting improvements. Moreover, lessons that are emerging from the inadequacies of past broad policy approaches appear to be a realization of the nuances and diversity of rural areas (Masinire, 2015).

With this context, MCRE (2005) in its key recommendations proceeded on the recognition that quality of rural schooling can be improved only if policy action takes note of the local milieu and build on existing political, social and economic structures, capabilities and assets of the local communities (p.2). The conceptual shift from uniform national policy to context specific polices noted by the MCRE (2005) was also complimented by structural support. Consequently, a directorate of rural education was established in 2007 to oversee the implementation of rural policies at the provincial level.

Mexico

A 'struggling discourse' is often reflected in Mexican policy documents, where dichotomies exist and often perpetuate disadvantages. The *Urban Normal Schools* (UNS), for example, is inspired by the apparently contradictory "official discourse", reflecting both patriotism, laicism, the preservation of modern institutional arrangements, as well as progressive developments of newer globally oriented reforms that focus on equal educational opportunities. The prevailing discourse centres around "quality of education" and "Teaching Quality Practices", yet in practice, the pursuit of permanent teacher's evaluation, standardization of practices in schools, efficiency and standardized exams are paramount (Bocking, 2019).

The *Rural Normal Schools* (RNS) model, "had a great apogee in the 1920s to the 1940s and its objective was to educate the rural-Indigenous populations that for a long time had been relegated from all right to a better life" (Senabria, 2016, p. 204). The RNS model reflected an air of a revolutionary discourse, based on the owning and redistribution of national assets, community practices, and equal conditions to educate, which were considered above the achievement of positions in international rankings from examinations. In this view, education is one of the links in the longer chain to free the population of oppression and injustice, where stakeholders from communities decisively participate.

Studies from Sandoval (2007) and Estrada (1992), for example, on rural and urban PST, reveal a struggle for the prevalence of a discourse where innovation and community-based practices are rooted on a social justice discourse.

In summary, the discourse evident in policy texts across Australia, South Africa and Mexico is largely embedded in metrocentric ideals that do not explicitly recognise the local situation of RRR contexts.

Research question 3: Is there evidence of RRR *policy initiatives* that highlight innovative asset-based, educational practices?

This section highlights examples of asset-based RRR practices in Australia, South Africa and Mexico. The policy trajectory approach used for this analysis highlights five core policy threads embedded within policy processes, namely the 5Ps: people, philosophy, place, processes and power (Ledger & Vidovich, 2018). These policy threads are used to synthesise the findings and reveal the enablers and constraints to policy enactment identified in each example (Table 4).

Table 4

Examples of Assets-based RRR Educational Practice (5Ps).

Country and program name	People	Place	Philosophy	Processes	Power
Australia *WA Country teaching program*	Collaborative effort between the Dept. of Education, work force planning and universities	Final year pre-service students undertaking practicum in RRR areas	Collaboration; financial and professional support for students	Government tracking impact of participants' job prospects	Quality process and outcomes
South Africa *Rural Teacher Education Project at University of KwaZulu-Natal*	A limited number of projects for RRR education	Supports final year students undertaking practicum in RRR areas	Based on strengths-based paradigms of rurality	A limited number of students can be accommodated	Projects are limited and peripheral to urban-biased teacher education programs
Mexico *Tele-secondary schooling*	World Bank funded management programs and mobile tutors		Policies are disarticulated	Programs are poorly funded	Constitutional guidelines for equality may improve equality for RRR Ed.

Australia

The Western Australia (WA) Country Teaching Program initiative exemplifies collaboration between the Department of Education, work force planning and universities. This multi-sector initiative supports final year students from five universities in WA to undertake 10 weeks of practicum in RRR areas. Since its inception in 2011, it has supported over 550 high achieving preservice teachers with financial and professional learning support.

The movement of the cohort involved in this initiative was tracked from 2011 until 2018, showing that in 2018, 84% of the participants were still employed, of which 73% have worked in rural locations and of these 50% are still working in a rural location. Over a third of the 2018 cohort were employed directly into the rural and remote school that they taught and over 50% were employed within the region they undertook their CTP. Principals consistently cite the program as an excellent means of identifying strong candidates who are willing and able to take on contracts in difficult to staff areas. The program has been widely recognised for its quality process and outcomes with state, national and international recognition (OECD, 2019; SPERA, 2017). However, whilst these examples highlight moves toward asset-based initiatives across Australia, the uptake of these directives has been inconsistent and there is no evidence of widespread asset-based initiatives across RRR education in Australia.

South Africa

The conception of rurality in South Africa presupposes the development of policies and programs of intervention to address rural education challenges. There are a number of rural oriented teacher education projects operational in some universities in South Africa. For

example, the *Rural Teacher Education Project* at University of KwaZulu-Natal (Islam, 2012), the *Kwena Basin Project* and the *Bushbuckridge Rural Project* at the University of the Witwatersrand (Maringe, Masinire, & Nkambule, 2015; Place, 2004) are initiatives that offer pre-service teaching practicums in rural areas. The scale of these projects is limited considering the number of student teachers the programs can accommodate; however, these projects are peripheral to the main teacher education programs which have retained urban-based teaching practicums.

Programs on effective leadership in rural and township disadvantaged schools in South Africa are limited (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010). In particular, educational policy for RRR centres has typically promoted improvements targeted at the periphery of the educational system rather than its core, resulting in piecemeal rather than long-lasting changes to rural education (Levin & Lockheed, 2011; Heneveld and Craig, 1996).

Maringe et al., (2015) described some of the leadership challenges faced by schools in resource-deprived communities. Similarly, Ngcobo & Tikcly (2010) highlight some of the essential characteristics of effective school leaders in rural schools, where the majority of the leaders worked intensively with the local community to mobilize resources and broker a safe and secure environment for learners. Ngcobo and Tickly (2010) clearly outlined the key characteristics of effective leadership with respect to the context for specific responsiveness of school leaders:

> Bringing the best out of our most disadvantaged learners requires that the school engages with the contexts that they are from and seek ways to actively empower parents with ways to support their children's learning. This involves engaging sensitively with a range of cultural values around the purpose of education (Ngcobo & Tickely, 2010 p. 26).

Despite the efforts of government policy proposals, however, there has not been systematic uptake of asset-based teacher and school leadership approaches in teacher education in South Africa.

Mexico

There are limited examples of successful asset-based initiatives in Mexican education, explained in part by the teachers' movement led by the *Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* (CNTE) which played an iconic role in modern Mexican history, with a direct impact on public and rural education (Bocking, 2019). In this movement, high rates of poverty in Mexico and insecurity caused by the drug cartels embedding itself within the state resulted in the abduction and killing of 43 young male student–teachers in 2014 from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College in Guerrero. The ensuing teachers' movement thereafter has great symbolic significance and capacity to wage large scale, militant struggles if needed, and as a result, few initiatives have been directed solely at improving RRR education.

Policies in Mexican education system are typically disarticulated and are often not adequately funded to be properly implemented. However, one successful example was the introduction of tele-secondary schooling in 1968, which in 2018, still serves nearly 2 million Mexican youths with a dropout rate of only 9 percent (SEP, 2018). In 2015, the World Bank funded a compensatory project and introduced early childhood programs, school-based management programs and mobile tutors to 172 of the most marginalised municipalities. Results showed a significant increase in test results of an average of 60% for Grade, 3, 6, 9 students with staff remaining longer in country areas and increased community engagement of parent associations (World Bank, 2015).

In summary, the above examples initiatives show some evidence of some asset-based initiatives across Australia, South Africa and Mexico, however wide-scale implementation is limited and there are few examples of assets-based education in RRR contexts.

Discussion and Analysis across the Cases

We used the policy analysis framework developed by Ledger & Vidovich (2018) (Fig.1) to guide the analysis and triangulate the overall findings. Key themes that emerged from the analysis include: a) global influences and educational standardisation, b) a metrocentric bias in policy texts, and c) limited exemplars of assets-based RRR education. These themes are discussed separately below.

Global Influences and Educational Standardization

The global influences driving educational standardisation and quality agenda discourses (Sahlberg, 2012) were evident across the policy texts of the three countries and are similar to national educational directives in the US, Chile and the UK as noted by Harvey (2007). This turn of the century phenomenon continues to permeate around the globe but has modified in form when adopted and adapted by national systems, and continues to impact the local context of RRR education (Fuller & Stephenson, 2019).

The current wave of educational standardisation and quality agenda is driven by strong global voices, including UNICEF and OECD (Ledger et al., 2019). UNICEF supports government capacity to improve programme planning and results-based management while implementing innovative interventions to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. In addition, the OECD is conducting a trial of an *Initial Teacher Preparation Study* (ITP) to identify common challenges, strengths and innovations in initial teacher education (OECD, 2019).

The OECD's influence is evident in newly designed initial teacher education policy documents in Australia (*Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership)* and in Mexico (*National Strategy for Continuous Training of Teachers)* which are designed to strengthen its teaching profession by adopting a system of standards-based teacher evaluation. These policies encouraged Mexico to "raise the bar" for entry into the profession especially at teachers' colleges, develop a "standards-based teacher evaluation system focused on improving teaching", and in particular "[establish] a coherent evaluation and assessment system covering student achievement, school evaluation and system evaluation" (OECD, 2018, p. 6).

A similar push for standards-based accountability is evident in South African policies, designed to "raise efficiency and equity in education by improving teacher training, enhance accountability and increase monitoring of school leadership" (OECD, 2018). Australia's lack of improvement in the PISA testing regime has prompted major policy directives over the last decade including the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (2011-2013) and the more recent focus on developing 'leadership capabilities' (2019). However, the 'one size fits all' quality agenda reflected in global movements toward educational standardisation privileges metro-centric practices and ideals that do not acknowledge the specific needs and local context of rural areas.

A Metrocentric Bias in Policy Texts

Our study presented here indicates that policy texts across Australia, South Africa and Mexico continue to focus on the challenges and problems in RRR centres, with a negative discourse focusing on high rates of attrition. Our study has highlighted a legacy of historical contextual relics that can distort the realities of living and teaching in RRR centres. Dichotomies exist in each of the documents; urban/rural; black/white; advantaged/disadvantaged; rich/poor; state and private. The historical vestiges of metrocentric policies that marginalise RRR education continue to exist across all three countries, and predominately reflect a discourse of 'deficit' or 'other' (Hartnack, 2017). This study counters this emphasis by highlighting the importance of leaders and teachers as change agents for asset-based programs in rural areas. A reframing of top down neoliberal metro-centric discourses and agendas is called for to help showcase rural exemplars.

Historical themes are evident in the initial teacher education programs that do not focus on upskilling qualified teachers and preparing pre-service teachers for the specific demands of RRR teaching. Whilst there have been recent moves towards creating opportunities for pre-service practicums in RRR areas, for the majority of country schools, the most inexperienced teachers continue to work in the areas where students have the most need (Mukeredzi, 2013). This tends to perpetuate the challenges because underqualified teachers tend to lack classroom management skills (Carelse, 2018), and the general experience appropriate to living and working in small communities (Halsey, 2018; Ledger, et al., 2015).

Limited Exemplars of Assets-based RRR Education

Within the somewhat predictable backdrop of marginalized policy and practices that cater for the preparation of preservice teachers and leaders for living and working in RRR contexts, our study has revealed only a few examples of assets-based educational practice (Trinidad et al., 2014). The examples from Australia, South Africa and Mexico provide some insight the development of future policy and practice, where leaders and teachers are seen as formative change agents, building on the assets of the local context that seek to develop potentialities and possibilities in rural contexts.

Examples offered from Australia, South Africa and Mexico reflect innovative but limited solutions to achieving more effective RRR education, where solutions centre on particular programs and individuals, rather than wholistic efforts at a systems level. One approach common to all the three nations was to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience practicums in local RRR contexts; however, there was little evidence to suggest that these programs were effective, or that practicums were adequate to prepare teachers for RRR locations (SPERA, 2018). Our findings confirm Ngcobo and Tickly (2019) observations, who found that initiatives focusing on engaging sensitively with cultural values around the purpose of education that identified community strengths were highlighted as the most successful starting points for improving education in RRR contexts.

Although we found only limited examples of assets-based education, this study highlights the potential of positioning leaders and teachers in schools as central to creatively connecting, adapting, and utilising the potential of the local context and environment. This coincides with Clarke, Murphy and Lorenzoni's (2018) observation, acknowledging place and context is essential to developing positive educational outcomes for rural and remote students.

Whilst accepting that there are many challenges in RRR contexts, we argue that successful educational initiatives in RRR contexts rests on policy directives that promote ways in which schools can develop asset-based initiatives that link with local contextual economic, cultural, and community resources (Clarke, Murphy & Lorenzoni, 2018; Reid, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirms Cloke's (2006) view, that "we need to understand how different theoretical frames of rurality illuminate very different pictures of rurality and indeed steer research, practice (education) down very different pathways" (p.19). Whilst historical influences and global forces have shaped policy directives that continue to perpetuate the significant and persistent disadvantage in RRR contexts, we have shown exemplars of an assets-based approach that hold promise for improving RRR education.

Whilst we found only a few examples of an assets-based approach, the success of these exemplars nevertheless highlights the potential of this approach for creating sustainable improvements in RRR contexts. In highlighting the pivotal role of school leaders and teachers as change agents and a modified approach to the preparation of teachers (Cuervo, 2016; Halsey, 2018), we suggest that the success of rural and remote schooling rests in the hands of teachers at the chalkface and leaders within these contexts, rather than the top-down neoliberal approach embedded in current policy frameworks.

Central to this process are university researchers and academics monitoring the decisions made at a state and national level that influence the unique needs of RRR and preparation of leaders and teachers in RRR centres (Halsey 2018). We suggest, therefore, that an increased focus on initial teacher education designed to meet the specific cultural, economic and social demands of the local context is needed. Investing in preparing leaders and teachers to work in these diverse contexts is an essential starting point for changing policy discourse and RRR practices.

To realise the productivities and potentialities of RRR contexts, we advocate for creative and innovative practice within teacher education and leadership programs that emphasise an assets-based approach. Continuing to develop and refine ways of attracting and retaining, experienced leaders and teachers to the most demanding schools and locations needs to be 'front and centre' of the planning and work to enhance RRR achievements and opportunities (Trinidad et al., 2014). Only then will we have an opportunity to redress the balance between rural and urban and reframe the future policy discourse for RRR education.

Declaration of interest statement
We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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