

Article

Teacher Engagement in Rural Sporting Clubs: Knowing Your Community

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Abstract

Community engagement is a critical aspect of rural teacher recruitment, retention, and pre-service placements. To better understand what community engagement may be for teachers, this article explores why rural teachers engage or do not engage with their local sporting club. The study, set in a small town in rural Australia, uses a semi-autoethnographic approach, combining personal experiences with fieldwork and interviews. Rural teachers' engagement with local sporting clubs is influenced by their understanding of the club's role in community life and their personal affinity for rural lifestyles. Findings reveal that engagement is often tied to teachers' love of sports, family traditions, and desire to contribute to community sustainability. The club provides opportunities for building relationships and developing local knowledge (*mētis*), which is crucial for navigating rural social spaces. However, challenges exist, including managing professional boundaries, time commitments, and potential conflicts. Non-engagement may stem from personal preferences, unfamiliarity with local traditions, or concerns about maintaining professional distance. Understanding the nuanced role of sporting clubs as anchor institutions in rural communities is vital for teachers' professional and social integration, regardless of their level of direct involvement.

Keywords: rural education; community engagement; initial teacher education; teacher attraction and retention; sporting clubs; rural social space; *mētis*; autoethnography



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1. Introduction

I tried to do the things you were meant to do when you start to be a teacher in a small, rural town. I knew I should 'get involved' with the community. It would help me to settle into my new home, to get to know my students and colleagues and their families better, and just to have something fun to do beyond work. My new town loved sports—I love sports. This should be easy! All of my work-friends or their families were engaged with The Sporting Club (everyone seemed to be connected to The Club), and they extended many invitations to join. But, beyond the various stressors of moving to a new town in a new country and starting my teaching career, the first wave of obstacles to joining the local Sporting Club came. First, I was wholly unfamiliar with the structure of sports in Australia—they were not organized through schools but through volunteer-run clubs in town, which governed several sports and had teams for all ages. In Term One, preseason started for the major sports, netball and Australian Rules Football (footy), neither of which I knew how to play. The 'fishbowl' nature of life in a town smaller than my high school and college in the US started to sink in, and a few unpleasant interactions with parents of students whom I understood were heavily engaged in The Club (everyone seemed to be

connected to The Club), put me off joining. So, I joined one of the independent sports and for a few years, I was a goalie for a (field) hockey team. Eventually, it became clear this wasn't a great fit for me. While the players were friendly, they weren't 'my people' and it was difficult as a single person with a full-time job to commit to a day of hockey every Saturday from April–August when the shops in town and in the regional centre closed for the weekend at noon on Saturday. By then, I had formed neutral to negative opinions of The Sporting Club with its drama and gossip spilling into school from the students and adults, which intersected with my work and relationships with students, particularly in my role as the coordinator of Year Nine (14–15-year-olds). And I did not want to be in a changeroom with former or current students. Despite my well-known and growing love of footy, and The Club being the centre of town and a great joy (and yet source of frustration) for my closest friends, 'getting involved' with The Club as a teacher was unappealing to me. I would attend home games a few times a year to watch my students play, but only with other teacher-friends and ideally watching from their cars parked around the oval. Occasionally on Saturday nights, I would return after games for the 'carrying on' in the clubrooms, but more often I would just meet up with mates down the pub once they were done. So, why did they do it? Why—and how—did so many teachers play and volunteer at The Club? It seemed as obvious to them why they would as it did to me why I would not—what was I missing?

There are continuing, widespread challenges with rural teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention in Australia and internationally (Halsey, 2018; Guenther et al., 2023; Murphy et al., 2025; Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2020; White & Downey, 2021). As such there have been many efforts in many places to address them with varying levels of success—for examples of innovation as well as the persistent challenges in the Australian context see McPherson et al. (2024) and Roberts and Downes (2020); for European examples see Ovenden-Hope and Passy (2020); and see Seelig and McCabe (2021) and White and Downey (2021) for US and other international examples. Indeed, the topics of rural teacher preparation, attraction, recruitment, and retention have remained a significant focus of the field internationally for decades (Guenther et al., 2023). One frequent recommendation through this body of literature is that pre- and in-service teachers should get involved with the local community. Developing connections with the community has been identified as a strength in pre-service teacher placements, a key factor in helping teachers settle into their new town and school, and one of the reasons long-term teachers give for staying (Halsey, 2018; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Downey, 2021; McCredie et al., 2025; McPherson et al., 2024; Murphy et al., 2025; Seelig & McCabe, 2021). Options for 'getting involved' differ from place to place, and person to person, but common suggestions centre on social activities such as sports and volunteer groups (Halsey, 2018; Macdonald et al., 2025; McCredie et al., 2025; Murphy et al., 2025; Seelig & McCabe, 2021). In this article, I unpack why teachers may choose to 'get involved' in one specific, very Australian social organization—the small-town sporting club.

Sporting clubs exist all over Australia, but their social position in smaller towns is more consequential than in larger (sub)urban places (Frost et al., 2013; Spaaij, 2009; Tonts & Atherley, 2010; Waite & Clifton, 2015). These clubs govern several sports with teams for young children through adults, typically netball, footy (Australian Rules Football or rugby), and cricket, but can expand to sports like (field) hockey, soccer, swimming, or tennis—depending on local interest, facilities, as well as resources such as money and people willing to play and volunteer; there can be sports in town that self-govern. Sporting clubs are "big business in Australia and... at grassroots level, things can get complex and remarkably inventive" (Hargreaves, 2023, para. 1) with potentially millions of dollars flowing through even small-town clubs annually. However, they are heavily dependent on

volunteers. Footy (whichever is the locally preferred code) is the dominant sport, requiring and bringing in the most resources and people, to the extent that ‘footy club’ can be used interchangeably with ‘sporting club’. In rural places, teams compete in regional leagues of similarly sized towns (when possible). There is no promotion or relegation to other leagues, but there is a near-constant fear of clubs or leagues folding or merging with another due to lack of resources (Frost et al., 2013; Spaaij, 2009). In many small towns, it is the largest social institution people choose to engage with, and in many ways is difficult to avoid (Frost et al., 2013; Spaaij, 2009; Tonts & Atherley, 2010). Participating in the sporting club (hereafter ‘the club’) as a player, volunteer, and/or spectator is a social norm in rural towns for people of all ages and backgrounds (Frost et al., 2013; Spaaij, 2009; Tonts & Atherley, 2010; Waitt & Clifton, 2015). Clubs have important functions beyond sports—they host social events, rent their clubrooms out for private events (e.g., parties, funerals, teacher professional development sessions), and members volunteer around town. They serve as “anchor institutions” (McAraevey, 2022), social organizations which are specific to their place and contribute to community sustainability. To be a member of ‘the community’, to live *here*, is to be, at least tangentially, involved with the town’s club.

It follows that this is true for preservice teachers, new-to-town teachers, and established teachers. Positive engagement with the local club can fulfill a number of factors that contribute to attraction, retention, and ‘good’ rural teaching: understand their (new) communities, develop bonds with students and parents outside of classroom contexts, establish and demonstrate their ties and commitment to the school/town, and can serve as a key site for personal connection to combat loneliness and improve wellbeing (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Seelig & McCabe, 2021; Spaaij, 2009). However, the role of the club in town is not entirely unproblematic. Clubs can be nexus points for social challenges such as exclusion, poor mental health, toxic masculinity, drug and/or alcohol abuse, homophobia, and complex power dynamics (Frost et al., 2013; Spaaij, 2009; Tonts, 2005; Waitt & De Jong, 2014). There are additional challenges for teachers, especially young teachers, to navigate professionally with their social standing and legal responsibilities. These will be explored later in this article.

To address the research question of “*why do rural teachers engage (or not) with their local sporting club*”, specific terms require conceptualization. ‘Rural’ is a term whose definition varies across countries—and individuals—yet is under-conceptualized in much of the literature (Roberts et al., 2024). In Australia, regional-rural-remote (RRR) tends to be lumped together (Halsey, 2018; Murphy et al., 2025), which does not account for the diversity of places. I have tended to use ‘rural’ as a catch-all for places outside of the city (see, for example, Fuqua, 2019, 2024), but that is imprecise and can feed into a binary view of urban and rural. So, in this article, I will use the vernacular of sporting clubs and use ‘country’ when referring to the people and places in the underpinning study. This is arguably no more precise than ‘rural’, but it more accurately captures the everyday language used to talk about sports in Australia in the places between the suburbs and the red dirt of the Outback. Another key term whose common usage raises concerns of oversimplification is ‘community’ (Murphy et al., 2025). White (2019) warns that “the term ‘community’ risks portraying ‘rural places’ as homogenous and harmonious if not viewed critically” (p. 155). In any given place, there are multiple communities to which a person can belong or be excluded from (Somerville & Rennie, 2012; White, 2019, 2021). With acknowledgment of these complexities, I will use ‘community’ to stand for the local townspeople and in line with White’s (2019) assertion that preservice teachers (PST) need to be “community-ready” as well as “classroom-ready”; it is also the term used by participants in this study. Some of the challenges of conceptualizing both ‘rural’ and ‘community’ can be addressed by utilizing the rural social space model developed by Reid et al. (2010) that

uses the local economy, geography, and demographics to describe a place. The application of this model is detailed below in the Theoretical Framework. Finally, there are three similar verbs that need clarification: *engage*, *involve*, *participate*. I use ‘engage’ to mean deeper, active connections (a footy player is engaged); ‘involve’ is more informal and infrequent connection (a spectator is involved); and ‘participate’ is reserved for research-related tasks (interviewees participated in the project).

Ultimately, I argue that teachers engage (or not) with their local sporting club in part due to their propensity for sport, but also due to their understanding of the role of country sporting clubs in small towns. Developing those important connections to the community, which we know helps to get and keep rural teachers, is related to how well people know their community, their practical knowledge of *this* place. By looking at the local knowledge gained in engaging (or not) with a specific community organization, we can identify ways to better support teachers. While this article focuses on an Australian-specific example, such anchor institutions exist in all contexts.

Theoretical Framework

To engage with your rural community, you need to *know* your rural community; to know your rural community, you need to *engage with* your rural community. As noted above, there are many benefits to teachers knowing their rural community. Reid et al. (2010) articulated the need for teachers to know their place in the rural social space, which Green and Reid (2021) further elaborated on with a focus on the temporal elements of rural social space. The model of rural social space can be used to describe the uniqueness of each rural place through its geography, demography, and economy. They define rural social space as “the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time” (Reid et al., 2010, p. 269). This has been a guiding light to my understanding of different ruralities (Alexander & Fuqua, 2024; Fuqua, 2019; Roberts & Fuqua, 2021) as it cuts through jurisdictional definitions of rural, considers community sustainability, and rejects binary positioning of urban-rural. While they have applied it to teachers and other rural human service careers (Green & Reid, 2021), I apply it here to sporting clubs—the sustainability of this anchor institution (McAreavey, 2022) is intertwined with the sustainability of the school (another anchor institution) and the town itself. Part of knowing the community is knowing how the sporting club fits into and affects the local rural social space.

Knowing one’s place enables meaningful action and engagement within the social space. Reid et al. (2010) explained using Bordieuan concepts that rural social space is “an interaction of *field* and *habitus*, which produces and reproduces itself in accordance with the capitals that define it” (emphasis in the original, pp. 269–270) and emphasized that it is not a universal concept. Lowery and Villalba (2025) use a similar concept of *mētis*, defining it as “sensible and practical knowledge of *the local*” (emphasis in the original, p. 185), building on Scott’s (1998) revival of the ancient Greek concept in modern times. I argue that a key component of knowing your place in rural social space is your *mētis*, the “knack” (Scott, 1998, p. 311) of living *here*. *Mētis* is tied to a specific context, both physical and social, and requires the deliberate enactment of skills gained through experience (Scott, 1998). Where *habitus* is a broader, more socially embedded concept about how we internalize and reproduce social structures (Bourdieu, 1999), *mētis* refers to specific, practical knowledge that allows for effective action in particular contexts (Lowery & Villalba, 2025). Understanding both concepts provides a rich framework for analyzing how individuals navigate both social and practical challenges in their lives.

In this article, I use *mētis* to help explain how teachers engage with the sporting club in terms of what is the practical knowledge of *here*—of this school, this club, in this town, at

this time—that they need to have, or develop, in order to more fully know their place in the rural social space, personally and professionally. In the Discussion section, I unpack the examples of *mētis* that have been gained through engagement, or non-engagement, with the local sporting club. To engage with your rural community, you need *mētis* of your rural community; to develop *mētis* of your rural community, you need to *engage with* your rural community.

2. Materials & Methods

This article is based on a semi-autoethnographic project that explored youth transitions through sporting clubs in rural Australia and clubs' social functions. It draws on personal experiences over nearly two decades and ethnographic fieldwork conducted over three years (2023–2025). To capture the specificities of people and places, I used qualitative methods of data collection (Bryman, 2021). Through semi-autoethnography, I utilized my deep and rich background in the research site to better understand and share nuanced, contextual details while triangulating my experiences against others' (Chang, 2008). The methodology suits the research question as it was born from my own discomfort and confusion. As Bochner and Ellis (2021) explain, “autoethnographers are in the habit of picking at our scabs, exposing our warts, vacillating between angst and anger” (p. 253)—why *did* teachers engage (or not) with their local sporting club when I would not? But to develop a more holistic answer, I needed to hear from others, particularly those who did engage, to wrestle with the paradox of unpacking my beliefs while trying to understand others' (Hamm, 2014). By combining my personal reflections with data from a more traditional ethnography, the complexities of life *here*, including social interactions and norms, were more fully explored (Chang, 2008).

While my positionality and intertwined relationships with the site provided important context and assisted in data collection, they also raised thorny ethical challenges. I had 10 years of living and teaching in this town, which provided me with a variety of examples of engagement over time. I knew many of the people in town—most participants were friends and/or former colleagues, students, and their families. This is a strength of autoethnographic research as it is a “humane, qualitative field of inquiry that required us to develop caring relationships with others instead of standing apart from them in the name of objectivity and rigor” (Bochner & Ellis, 2021, p. 252). But this position of insider/outsider was a double-edged sword. Some people did not want to participate due to our past relationships; I had my own embedded assumptions; and by including myself in the data and various research outputs, I am an avenue to identifying the town and people. To mitigate these, I respected those who did not want to participate by even removing personal reflections from the data set that included them; I engaged with various critical friends from town and from elsewhere as means to ‘check for’ personal bias or misunderstandings; and I have attempted to mask individual participants through practices such as amalgamation, some unattributed quotes, and relying on my own reflections. I cannot completely ensure anonymity—which was explained to participants in Plain Language Statements and Consent forms to inform their consent for interviews—externally due to my digital footprints (Downes et al., 2021) leading back to my ‘hometown’, nor internally due to the small number of people participating being in a tight-knit community. I use pseudonyms for the town and participants in accordance with conditions set by the Human Ethics Research Committee at The University of Melbourne. Fully masking the club and participants risks homogenizing the rural (Reid, 2021) in a project that attempts to celebrate the uniqueness of place and an article that argues knowing one's specific place is vital. This is a conundrum I do not fully have an answer for, but I have included details about the local context that are relevant to the findings.

Research Site & Data

The town of Nada sits amongst canola and grain fields, an hour's drive to the nearest regional hub and five to the nearest city. In 2024, the year of most of the ethnographic data collection, the town had a population of approximately 2000 and the prep-12 government school had 225 students with 27 full-time equivalent teachers ([Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2025](#)). Each week, at least 200 people 'pull on the guernsey' to play for a team, dozens volunteer in support roles, and home games can draw over a quarter of the population—considerably more if the men's footy team is doing well.

Ethnographic data collection (2023–2025) included interviews, chats with people around town, photographs, publicly available media, and fieldnotes, while my personal experiences (2007 onward) included reflective narratives, old photo albums, critical conversations, and a self-interview where I answered the questions myself that I posed to participants ([Denzin, 2014](#)). The main data sources for this article were semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers, one to four hours each, and my own experiences. To preserve some anonymity, I will not include specific details for each participant, but will summarise the sample as representing: all career stages (preservice—retired); women and men; "born and bred" locals and those from elsewhere; teachers of different year levels and subjects; parents, grandparents, those without children; married and single; and those who were deeply engaged with the Club for decades, some that left on good and some on bad terms, some never engaged. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with transcripts member-checked for accuracy ([Bryman, 2021](#)). To analyze the data, I began with the explicit interview questions of: "please tell me about your involvement with the Club, why are you involved, and why might teachers not get involved". This was an iterative process that evolved as themes emerged ([Bryman, 2021](#)) around rural ways of living and local knowledge. After coding these questions, I went through the rest of their interviews for any further details, as well as interviews with non-teacher participants who had mentioned teachers.

3. Results

I have organized this Results section into two parts—the reasons teachers get engaged and the reasons why they may not. Many of the reasons why they do centre on it being part of their preferred country lifestyle. The reasons they may not are more varied, ranging from professional tensions, personal interest, and misconceptions. For most of the participants, the benefits of engaging in some capacity outweighed the challenges or tension points.

3.1. "I've Always Been at the Club"

For many participants, contributing to the sporting club was an expected part of country life. It had been part of their lives (in Nada or elsewhere) since childhood; giving up their engagement would be stressful and unpleasant. Participants gave straightforward reasons for why they continued to play and volunteer—love of the game, mates, and for future generations. For example, Jacob mentioned his "love" of footy 14 times during his hour interview, and Jared drove 10 h roundtrip every week to play.

Family engagement was a significant theme. The teachers who had grown up in country areas discussed the generational tradition of playing and volunteering, highlighting the importance of ensuring a "healthy, positive club for my kids, for all the kids" (Sally). They were able to take a flexible approach to their level of engagement in the Club depending on work and family commitments. Walt discussed how he had relinquished much of his volunteering load during the early years in the "full-on" job. Notably, the "raised in the club" (John) teachers held prominent on-field and committee roles, which demanded considerable time and specialized skills. Dorothy, a retired primary teacher from a farming family, described her continued presence on the sidelines without family playing as "what

else would I do on Saturday? This is where I can see all my friends. . . and I like seeing what all my old students get up too.” For some, family engagement included their children. Not only did they watch their children’s games, but they also had other rostered duties, usually a few hours in the canteen. This could extend beyond their children’s playing days because “I know how to start the coffee machines” (Linda) or “the Club was good for my kids and not everyone is confident enough in their maths to run the till” (Nicki). Some participants had started raising their families in the Club by bringing their young children to training sessions with a collective effort on the sidelines to mind them.

The nature of education-related jobs lent itself to continued engagement, which was key given the relatively small number of adults available to play or volunteer to keep the Club functioning. Teaching was one of a few local jobs that could be done with an injury or for which an injury was unlikely to put the family’s income at risk. Participants shared stories of good players who had to “hang up their boots” as they began labour-intensive jobs—“you can’t drive a tractor with a broken leg” (Barb). Whereas Jimmy, who had “bones made of hotdogs”, nursed a wrist injury through part of the season in which he played his 200th game, and another now-retired teacher had played over 500 games and well into his 60s. Working at the school provided other practical affordances such as being less than a kilometre from the Club and most mandatory after-school work requirements were finished before training sessions. A significant example was the ability to train with the local team while on placement during initial teacher education. Nick talked about how he had trained with the Club during his six-week placement and developed friendships with non-teachers. He credited this as a major reason for accepting a job at the school.

Participants discussed ways that engaging with the Club was beneficial to their work at the school. Mostly, the positives of building relationships for classroom teaching were glossed over as obvious shared knowledge through our backgrounds in teaching, but everyone shared anecdotes of how those connections were critical beyond pedagogy. There were mutual benefits of getting better acquainted for new teachers—the community came to know them through their engagement, and they came to know the community. Some new teachers chose to play for Nada for a few years to develop those community connections despite their families living in a neighbouring town. The positive relationships male teachers developed at the Club helped at school with a wide range of issues, such as handling delicate conversations with teenage boys about needing to use deodorant and washing clothes regularly, through to intervening and managing aggressive outbursts from students. Sensitive, timely information which might not otherwise be shared through formal channels at the school or which might have taken longer to reach key helpers like school-based counsellors, would be gleaned through sharing the social space of the Club.

For non-local but country-raised Victorians, starting work at the school also meant starting their engagement with the Club. The state of the Club, including available coaching or player positions, was frequently raised during interviews for teaching positions and during their orientation to the school. They arrived expecting to integrate themselves into the Club; it was part of their desired lifestyle and the appeal of living in a rural place. They explained that changing clubs due to employment did not cause tension or “a bad break up” with their previous clubs, so it was not awkward to visit friends and family back home. Chris shared a story about his excitement for moving to a smaller town so that he could finally play footy. He had not played as a boy growing up in a regional town, so he had been reluctant to join a club as an adult. When he arrived in Nada, “it didn’t matter how bad I was, they just needed players” (Chris). During recess, he would practice basic skills with the primary school children who “thought it was pretty cool that you were out there playing”. Although he admitted to “never being a superstar” and did not play many seasons, he remained a volunteer for decades.

There were a handful of locals who credited their engagement as beneficial during their transition into teaching. Several of the “raised in the club” teachers talked at length about how continuing their playing served as stress relief during their studies. Some had been able to take advantage of recent flexibilities in ITE delivery through early permission to teach and/or subjects offered online, with one career-changer commenting that it was unlikely he would have become a teacher if he had to leave town for his degree. Another method preservice teachers used was returning from their university studies to continue playing for the Club every weekend. Jared explained this helped him keep strong connections with his mates and allowed him more time with family, despite hours of driving—“I couldn’t stop smiling!” The tradition of returning to play for their home team was not exclusive to Nada, nor was it new. Some who had taken advantage of this system in previous generations and at other clubs described it as their part-time job during university, which “paid better and was a helluva lot more fun than working at Maccas [McDonald’s], I can tell you!” (Luke). Lastly, there were locals who left for their teaching degree and either returned immediately or after a few years teaching elsewhere. Jacob explained that they had always intended to return home. For him and his wife, re-joining the teams they had played for as youth was an assumed part of going home—“Mel, why would you even ask about it?”

Another reason for being engaged was that it was a community expectation—people were needed to keep the Club sustainable. There were assumptions from Club and community members, particularly if the person was known to be sporty or was hired as a Physical Education teacher. With teaching being a job that facilitated prolonged engagement, there were fewer “good reasons” for not contributing, like stepping back to raise a family or taking on new roles at school. There was widespread and perpetual concern about declining numbers of members, players, and volunteers. On top of playing and coaching, one teacher volunteered to drive children who otherwise would have been excluded to away games and pick them up for practices; these were children who were part of the town’s migrant community, from families that struggled financially, or whose parents did not want to engage with the Club. An example of the short and longer-term pernicious cycle was described to me using other folded or merged clubs in the region as warning—if there were not enough senior men’s footy players to field a team, then no footy games could be played. If the kids could not rely on being able to play regularly, then they would be less likely to remain members at a time when youth sport participation was already low post-pandemic. Without the junior players “coming up the ranks” to eventually fill the senior team and to be volunteers, the future would be grim: “The town dies when the club dies” (Sally). Engagement or involvement contributed to the common good of the town and its future.

3.2. “You Gotta Be Careful”

For all of the benefits and personal inclinations, teacher engagement with sporting clubs was still fraught. Young or new teachers may find navigating the blurry lines between work and social life tricky; there can be significant tensions between the school, the Club, and the wider community; engagement may amplify the ‘fishbowl’ feeling associated with rural teaching; and people who grew up in different contexts may have misunderstandings, biases, and stereotypes about the Club. These may be reasons teachers choose not to engage or get involved in the first place, or to sever their engagement, or hypotheticals that could contribute to someone not engaging. Criticisms and tensions participants felt across their various roles in the community, even beyond the Club and the school, were difficult for people to fully disclose and are unethical to share in publications. As such, in this section I have deliberately used fewer attributed quotes, amalgamated some stories and participants, and relied more on my personal reflections—I was, after all, one of the infrequently involved teachers.

Some of the more significant concerns were for younger teachers or those new to juggling teaching in a country town while playing sports socially. Beginning teachers are prone to being time poor; the first years of teaching, including preservice placements, can be overwhelming with workload and stress (Fan & Fang, 2025; Heffernan et al., 2022). Adding the commitment required for organized sport on top of this can be too much for some. One of the reasons I retired from hockey was that it was difficult to “do all my adulting” while giving up Saturdays as a single person with a full-time job; it also impacted the time I had available to keep in touch with friends and family overseas. Local family obligations required even greater time management, particularly for those beginning their families while beginning their new careers. Participants shared stories of scaling back their Club commitments and their appreciation for the Club’s flexibility. There was some gender inequality in terms of who was more impacted by beginning a family. New mothers tended to take a temporary, perhaps becoming permanent, retirement from playing and/or their volunteer roles. New fathers also altered their engagement with the Club but did not necessarily retire. As discussed above, some found ways to continue their engagement, but for others, it was too much or necessitated a change in their priorities.

Younger and new teachers may have fewer strategies for keeping their personal and professional lives separate (Macdonald et al., 2025). Issues of personal and professional maturity and managing risk can also cause concern at school and in the community. Even for “born in the club” teachers, the mix of teaching while playing was still a new experience, including for career changers, to illustrate: a butcher’s apprentice does not have the same public profile as a teacher. There were occasions where those boundaries needed reinforcing—“please don’t let students call you by your nickname from the Club” or teachers reminding parents that while they were volunteering at the canteen wasn’t an appropriate time for a parent-teacher conversation. While there were relatively few major incidents during my time, they did cause lasting effects socially and professionally. Some young teachers continued living similar lifestyles to their non-teacher peers—who may be childhood friends and teammates—but their new professional expectations and lack of anonymity in the ‘fishbowl’ of small town living and teaching magnified any mistakes (Haynes & Miller, 2016). Not wanting to open oneself up to further scrutiny or gossip may be enough to put someone off engaging with the Club, or a breach of accepted norms may lead someone to end their engagement.

These risks were highest during social events where the likelihood of conflicts with their legal and professional obligations was most acute. One of the more visible situations arose after home games when the Club hosts a family-oriented dinner and awards presentation followed by a themed event (e.g., trivia, the annual ball) open to everyone. I attended occasionally; it was one of the ways I was involved with the Club. By late night, it was mostly young adults drinking alcohol—and a very small number would duck out to the parking lot for other substances or activities—until they decided to go home or to the pub. Older teachers shared advice to leave before things “get out of hand”, but staying until the early hours was not itself a significant issue in Nada, especially if done infrequently and with other teachers present. However, some community members and colleagues believed teachers should not be there after the organised activities. These concerns centred on the murky situations of socialising with students around, open secrets of what was allegedly happening when people went to the parking lot, the amount of alcohol consumed, and the ages of students consuming alcohol (legal drinking age is 18 in Australia). Simply being there could be considered a passive endorsement of such behaviours or role modelling undesirable behaviours such as binge drinking. Finding an appropriate balance of being a young person in a country town and being a teacher is difficult, individual, and may vary across time and contexts (Macdonald et al., 2025)—there were many stories shared

by older teachers about their younger days, which wildly conflict with current legislation, professional standards, and social norms. The ‘right’ balance was a challenge for young teachers, both new to town and locals, for those officially engaged with the Club and those like me who were not. Some participants identified this as a personal source of anxiety. The risks of not getting the balance ‘right’ may be enough to cause a teacher to steer clear all together, which limits their social opportunities, or they may “grow out of it” and adapt their Club engagement away from post-game socialising.

There were a smattering of more personal, individual considerations that impacted on people’s decisions to engage, or to what extent. As mentioned above, there were some teachers who lived in neighbouring towns, played for a Nada team briefly, but found it more convenient and community-minded to engage with the club where they lived. This was socially acceptable, as was playing for one of the few new women’s footy teams in the region or scaling back engagement to support a talented child’s attempts to make a team in a more competitive league hours away. However, ending your engagement with the Club to play for a rival club for money or because of disagreements with local coaches/club officials was not well received. There were generational grudges negatively affecting some clubs, schools, and families in the region. There was also a fine, blurry line between ‘quitting’ and ‘retiring’ from the Club—quitting meant severed relations and hard feelings, while retiring meant a reduction in engagement while keeping positive social relationships. Some teachers found the tensions between Club culture and school responsibilities to be too great for their personal morals. Some, like me, found these tensions to be even trickier to navigate while taking on more leadership roles at school, which they felt meant having to give up or significantly alter their engagement with any sporting club. However, the simplest reason some teachers did not get involved with the Club was that it did not interest them. One of the teachers was not involved with the Club because her sports were not under their umbrella but ran independently in town. Not everyone was keen on sports, and luckily in Nada there were several other outlets for socialising, like community theatre.

A final, significant factor in non-engagement was unfamiliarity. This was likely with people originally from elsewhere and acutely so for those who were not sporty. Participants who tended to get and stay engaged were part of sporting families and, if not a local, were from similar country areas. In my time at Nada, while there were teachers from interstate and overseas, only one from interstate (who attended an agricultural high school in South Australia) were personally engaged with the Club; some of their children were. Interestingly, this was not true for other occupations in town. Teachers who were not interested in sports—watching, playing—but grew up in a small country town were at least familiar with the tradition and “rhythm of the week” (Jimmy) set by the Club. For me, coming from the American high school and collegiate sports systems and off a farm in a rural town where teachers were unlisted in the phonebook, it was one of the more noticeable elements of culture shock. The closest reference point I had was my high school coaches who were also teachers. However, they were not competing alongside me, were not sharing a locker room, not socialising with/around me on Saturday nights, and there was clarity about when they were Teacher and when they were Coach. So, in the triage of managing the first year of teaching, life in a new country, and maintaining some level of sanity, engaging with the Club was not a high priority. I was ill-at ease with the notion of wearing ‘multiple hats’ in the fishbowl of Nada, extending to my return for data collection for this project, whereas it seemed my local colleagues, and in hindsight members of the community, were more comfortable with it. I had developed misconceptions about the potential value of giving up “me time” to engage with the Club. These were reinforced through gossip in the staffroom and classrooms as well as stressful interactions with parents I knew to be influential at the Club. When I did get involved as a spectator, I preferred to be

in the “teacher bubble” where a few of us would stand together to cheer on their children, our students, and our friends, lessening the chance of problematic interactions with parents, current or prior students, or other community members. While I was jealous that adults got to keep playing the sports they loved into adulthood, I had to come to terms that mine were not available, and so generally keeping clear of the Club meant fewer complicating factors in my small-town life.

Ultimately, for those of us who chose not to get involved with the Club officially or regularly, while most received plenty of invitations to join and polite questioning about ‘why not’, there were no significant consequences. As one of the other non-engaged teachers summarised, there are “no problems as long as you’re doing something in and for the community.” Contrary to my initial perceptions, not “everyone was connected to the Club” and there was community recognition that not everyone would be interested in the Club for various reasons.

4. Discussion

On the surface, the simple answer to “*why do rural teachers engage (or not) with their local sporting club*” is quite obvious—they (or their children) do or do not like the sports. This would be a common deciding factor for engagement with any social organisation in most communities—for example, there was no pressure or perceived risks to joining (or not) Nada’s theatre group. But given the outsized role that sporting clubs play in many country towns across Australia, they hold a powerful place in the town’s rural social space requiring a level of *mētis* whether you engage or not.

Engagement was deeply tied to people’s affinity for rural life *here*. Being involved or engaged with the club was part of what it meant to live in a place like Nada; it was part of what people understood—and sought out—as a rural lifestyle in this area. Sporting clubs are integral parts of the local social space (Fuqua, 2025; Spaaij, 2009; Tonts & Atherley, 2010), so engaging with, or at least understanding the role of the club, is crucial to understanding one’s place in the town and school. To develop one’s *mētis* requires an understanding of the multi-faceted roles that sporting clubs take on. A lack of knowledge about the dynamics of the club, leaves it open to stereotypes in the discourse and imagined Australian culture—as part of the rural idyll with country footy as a beloved place of mateship and tradition of close-knit communities or as part of “the fear of the ‘wide brown land’” (Reid et al., 2010, p. 267) as places of toxic masculinity, conservative traditions, and rife with substance abuse. Neither depiction is entirely true or entirely false, and the nuanced manifestations of ‘the local sporting club’ differs from one town to the next, one year to the next, and from one person’s perception to the next.

The participants in this study who were the most engaged with the Club tended to have the most positive things to say and some of the more nuanced critiques—they had accumulated the most *mētis*. The reasons participants gave for engaging with the Club mirror, and contribute to, many of the characteristics of the ‘teachers who stay’ rural and teachers who stay in the profession as identified in Australian and international literature: the Club is the source of some of their strong relationships outside of school, is an outlet for stress, and a way to maintain/improve their senses of wellbeing (Seelig & McCabe, 2021; Spaaij, 2009). It is unsurprising that those devoting significant time and resources to the Club highly value the personal and communal benefits of having a functional sporting club. Their recognition of its importance to community sustainability with the strong focus on “for the kids” is a demonstration of a *mētis* for country life *here*. It is not ‘fun’ to wake up early on a wintry Saturday morning to turn on the coffee machines, but it is an important, if under-appreciated, contribution to community life.

Their love for the sport and sense of community came through not just in their glowing descriptions but also in their stories of caution and tension. Addressing challenges associated with engagement with the club also requires *mētis*. While the challenges may be similar across country areas, they will manifest differently in each unique place. These are not issues that a blanket policy or approach can address; such policies tend to be metro-centric and impractical for rural places (Roberts & Green, 2013). There have been and will be ‘culture issues’ at the Club; be clashes with the school over priorities and expectations; and individual struggles and disagreements. But there was a sense of agency that by being engaged, they could assist in mediating and improving these. Two notable challenges for the individual teachers and the school were managing burnout and navigating the tension points around socially acceptable behaviour for young teachers. Concerns of burnout were raised about peers or family members, but most did acknowledge the need to moderate their engagement over time. Volunteer burnout is a significant challenge in country sporting clubs (Frost et al., 2013). With teacher burnout also a growing concern (Fan & Fang, 2025; Heffernan et al., 2022), it would be unfortunate for the school, club, and teachers themselves if they were over-extended by the Club through the activities that were meant to be stress-relieving. There is not a panacea for this, nor is there one for how young teachers share social space and enjoy being young in the fishbowl. These should be attended to individually and locally. One way to do this may be reconsidering the content and extent of mentoring programs. Teaching in rural schools requires knowing the context and your place in it (Reid et al., 2010), that includes life outside of school. Taking a more proactive approach than “hoping they don’t stuff up too badly” by ensuring there are conversations explicitly about engagement with the club—at various personal and career stages—may help to reduce the potential for problems.

Finally, for those who choose not to engage with clubs—because it was “too much of a hassle”, or they retired, or had a falling-out, or oppose teachers interacting with students that way, or just do not like sports—a basic level of understanding is still helpful. The first of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers focuses on knowing your students (AITSL, 2017). Nada may be more sports-orientated than other small country towns, but not so much to make it an outlier; understanding the social dynamics of sporting clubs in country towns is an integral part of knowing your students, of knowing your community, of knowing how to live *here*—your acquired *mētis*. As Jimmy stated, “you can’t escape it [Club]”—for one, the footy sirens can literally be heard across town as can the cacophony of honking car horns when goals are scored. While that may sound sinister (and in some towns and for some people it may be), sporting clubs can be true anchor institutions (McAreavey, 2022). They are the “social heart of the community” (Jordan) and are not just for sporting purposes. In many towns it is one of the largest physical places to gather. They offer one of the few thirdspaces (Soja, 1996) that is not officially connected with the government, school, or religion; there used to be townhalls but in some very small places they are no longer fit for purpose. One participant in describing a club “down the road” that was in danger of folding, wondered where all the communal cutlery would be stored if the club ceased to exist. Teachers do not have to be engaged with the sports teams—even after all this I am not sure I would change my level of involvement—but we need to have a nuanced understanding of the role of a club in town. To develop the “knack” (Scott, 1998, p. 311) of living *here*, we need some level of practical, sensible knowledge (Lowery & Villalba, 2025) of the local sporting club.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this article. The example explored is hyper-specific to this town, during this time frame, from a handful of perspectives. While it may be recognisable

across much of Australia, sporting clubs feature differently from country town to country town, and certainly from the suburbs where teachers do not have to play on teams with their students. It is based in a town with a relatively stable population and examines one club that has a “good reputation” (Gus) for prioritising community over on-field success. In part due to my long-standing relationships in the town, there are over-represented and missing voices. All of my close friends in Nada were teachers and heavily engaged in the Club—we all love footy. This likely contributed initially to my overestimating the influence and pervasiveness of the Club in social life. It may also have contributed to some people’s decisions not to participate in the project, like those with very strong negative feelings about the Club and/or teachers’ engagement with it.

5. Conclusions

The intention of this article was to go beyond the oft-repeated advice of needing to ‘get involved’ with the local community as a PST or new teacher by digging into a specific type of engagement with a significant social institution. Understanding what these anchor institutions are, how they function *here*, where and how teachers interact with them, is crucial to fully understanding the rural social space teachers exist in and navigate through. This aligns well with Cuervo’s (2025) continued call for greater recognition of the complexities of living and teaching rurally, including as a key factor to improving rural teacher preparation, attraction, and retention. Knowing one’s (rural) place, having a robust and evolving *mētis*, benefits teachers professionally and socially—and by extension benefits the town and sporting club. Rural schools need to retain their teachers, just as sporting clubs need to maintain engagement. Country towns need teachers in schools *and* the sporting club for sustainability. With acknowledgement that every (rural) place is unique, I suspect most have a dominant social organization, even if it is not as pervasive as a country Victoria sporting club. There is (hopefully) something that draws people from across the community together—be it youth clubs in Norway or high school football in Texas. Teachers and PSTs need to have an understanding of it before they can decide if or how to engage with it, and how to live and teach there. What are the social organizations in your place? How robust is your *mētis* regarding them? How do new people develop their *mētis* of them?

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