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To cite this article: Brad McLennan, Karen L. Peel, Patrick A. Danaher & Elizabeth Burnett (2024) Learning at a distance: recognising remote tutoring as a career, Distance Education, 45:2, 315-333, DOI: [10.1080/01587919.2024.2338718](https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2024.2338718)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2024.2338718>



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Published online: 26 May 2024.



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# Learning at a distance: recognising remote tutoring as a career

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## ABSTRACT

Remote Education Tutors (RETs) enact crucial roles in Australian distance schooling, by living with families who reside in geographically isolated locations and supporting their school age children's learning. As part of a larger research project, this paper presents a study of four RETs derived from semi-structured interviews conducted in their respective home schoolrooms. Informed conceptually by Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory (1979, 1986), the thematic analysis generated four substantive themes related to the participants' lives and work: pedagogical competencies; healthy relational dynamics; optimism with a solution focus; and substantive occupation. More broadly, the RETs contribute indispensably to the educational success and the lifestyle sustainability of the school age children with whom they work, yet currently there is no formal recognition of that contribution, just as there is no viable career pathway for RETs seeking to become qualified teachers. Accordingly, they are as occupationally invisible as the remote living families whom they serve.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 February 2023  
Accepted 19 February 2024

## KEYWORDS

Australia; career pathways; distance schooling; geographically isolated learners; Remote Education Tutors; rural and remote locations

## Introduction

Remote Education Tutors (RETs), who live and work in rural and remote areas, and who are commonly termed a *governess* or *govie* in Australia, require adaptability and resilience to face both familiar and unexpected challenges. For those who seek this employment, relocating to live and work with a family on a geographically isolated property is the reality of the job. However, this work is confidently embraced by a number of generally young women who agree that their role is unique and varied (Peel et al., 2022). Nevertheless, many do not see their work as a career opportunity, and it is well documented that there is no formal credentialling available that

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recognises the complex understanding and skill set required for this educational occupation (McLennan et al., 2022).

This paper explores the experiences of four RETs employed in the Capricornia and Central Highlands Regions in Queensland, Australia. The research identified the commonalities and differences of the specific work and recreational lifestyles of the RETs that they perceived as being integral to their everyday experiences. The RETs were active participants in semi-structured interviews enacted as conversations about their distinctive experiences, living and working with the children under their care. These interviews were conducted by the researchers in view of the schoolrooms on the properties, where the RETs fulfilled a supervisory role. The cornerstone of the conversations was their reflections about the rewards and challenges of their experiences particular to the role. The data were thematically analysed to provide research findings that offered a greater depth of understanding about the significance of the RETs' work.

Notably, Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) was employed to analyse the data to identify the systemic and structural influences that impacted on the RETs' experiences. This theoretical lens afforded new insights into the influences on and the challenges of the RETs' work. Furthermore, an understanding of the experiences of individual RETs within the larger context of distance schooling uncovered the contributions that they make and recognised this educative role.

For the work of the RET to be valued and respected, a system of credentialling that is specific to this unique position is necessary. In turn, this will provide structured skill development and a career pathway for RETs that will ultimately enhance educational opportunities for the students living in rural and remote locations, where attendance at a local school is not an option. Against the backdrop of that broader goal, this study investigated the perceptions of the impact of remote education tutoring on the RETs' lifestyles, experiences, and decisions.

## Background

Phase 2 of the Capricornia Project was designed to extend on the findings from Phase 1 to raise awareness and to inform educational change-makers about the requirements for professional learning and career pathways of the RET workforce. The aim of the initial research was to understand better the demographics of RETs (McLennan et al., 2022). In distance education in Australia, employed teachers based at purpose-built schools organise the curriculum and plan online lessons for the enrolled students. For much of the school day, the mandatory supervisory role of student learning is fulfilled by RETs, yet there is no formal qualification or training available for RETs to pursue that is designed to support them specifically in their role (Halsey, 2018). This research focused on RETs' perceptions of their work in order to gain a sense of what each individual experiences, and to articulate a collective discourse that informs the development of a career pathway. Access to credentialled learning would optimise their professional proficiency, enhance their employment status and security, and be responsive to the needs of students enrolled in schools of distance education (McLennan et al., 2022).

## ***Distance education in Australia***

Australia is a vast country that extends over 7.7 million square kilometres with a scattered population of approximately 26 million people, who predominantly live in the cities and along the coastlines (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a). For the remaining widely distributed population, Australia's large distances have necessitated the requirement of distance education for school-aged children living in geographically isolated locations. A remote area (in schooling) is best defined as being 56 km or more from the nearest school (Australian Government Services Australia, 2023). Geographically isolated students have no access to daily, face-to-face schooling, so they enrol in distance education or move to a boarding school located away from family and community.

In the early 1900s, to overcome the challenge of providing access to education for families living in remote areas, the first form of distance schooling in Australia was introduced as correspondence education (Stacey, 2005). Over time, the advancement of technology has seen the delivery medium evolve from the mailing out of learning materials and radio lessons, to an online platform via the internet, where distance education teachers and students interact during synchronous lessons. One constant that is central to children accessing education in geographically isolated locations is the educational continuity and learning support that is provided by the RET.

### ***Remote education tutors***

The responsibility for the organisation of the school day, the supervision of the children's work and the majority of the delivery of the curriculum in distance education are reliant on the commitment of the RET, who is accountable for the face-to-face adult supervision and educational support of distance education learners (ICPA, 2020). The position of the RET is mandated by the government for all distance education students (Department of Education, 2022). This is because the teachers in distance education schools organise and plan the curriculum and teach some lessons via digital communication from bases in regional centres that can be hundreds of kilometres from the students' learning locations. Since Newman (2014) revealed, "Although a small workforce, governesses and their work on remote stations deserve to be the subject of further research" (p. 51), limited research has been conducted into the critical role of the RET (Downes & Roberts, 2015; Halsey, 2018; McLennan et al., 2022; Peel et al., 2022; Tynan & O'Neill, 2007). As such, there is a distinct lack of awareness about this position and the challenges involved in supporting students through distance education (Pini & Mills, 2015).

The work of the RET is an often-overlooked occupation that is predominantly undertaken by a female workforce in Australia (McLennan et al., 2022). However, it is difficult to ascertain the size of the workforce, as the role of the RET has not been recognised as a distinctive job in the Australian Bureau of Statistic census, and is misrepresented under the categories of *childcare* or *nanny* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b). Furthermore, there are no customised formal qualifications required for the role, nor credentialing opportunities available for this mandated educator's

position, leading to a lack of recognition and career pathways for RETs (McLennan et al., 2022; Newman, 2014; Peel et al., 2022).

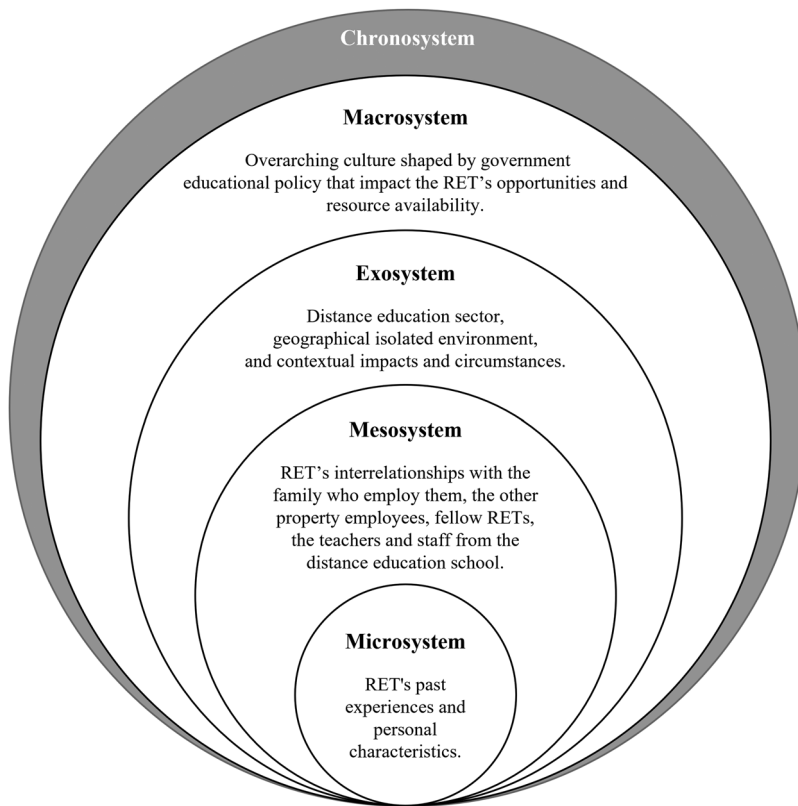
Recent research has been conducted to address this gap in the literature about the demographics of RETs in Australia (McLennan et al., 2022). In a national survey, 85% of respondents ( $N=575$ ) were not studying educational qualifications, and the majority of those in the RET position held a senior school certificate as their highest qualification. In addition, the employment of RETs has a high turnover, with 61% working for just 1–2 years, mostly with one family. Just 30% of the respondents viewed the work as a long-term career opportunity. The findings of this research (McLennan et al., 2022; Peel et al., 2022) also acknowledged the complexity of the RETs' role, with 80% of respondents identifying with being an organiser, communicator, teacher and manager in the distance education schoolroom. As such, the position of the RET comes with a high level of responsibility, with the surveyed RETs agreeing that their role was unique and varied, and indicating fluctuating confidence levels. Of significance, the majority of RETs recognised the need to be agile and flexible to adapt to situations that arise in geographically isolated locations. In most cases, they are living with the family for whom they are working, leading to a potentially complex social environment.

Considering the crucial nature of the RETs' role in the quality of students' educational outcomes, it is critical that further investigation be undertaken to understand better and recognise this workforce. It is argued that, without prerequisite qualifications, the largely invisible role of the RET risks the continuation of being overlooked as a substantive educational occupation (Peel et al., 2022), despite this role being mandated by government authorities for distance schooling.

## Conceptual framework for analysis

The application of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) elucidates how the work of the RET is influenced by the interactions within the immediate rural and remote setting, and how the other spheres of influence can affect the RETs' career development and career choices over time. The conceptual framework for this study, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's model Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986), as illustrated in Figure 1, depicts the RETs' environment in five interrelated systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. Representing the overarching element of time, the chronosystem reflects that the environment is not a temporally static entity, with the certainty of perpetual change in the RETs' personal life and professional workplace. The other four interactions are represented as occurring in nested systems encompassing the microsystem level at the centre.

The microsystem level, the inner-most system, includes the RET's past experiences and personal characteristics such as age, level of education, motivations and intrinsic influences related to interests, enjoyment and goals. The microsystem is unique to each RET, as it represents experiences as a pattern of activities, personal roles and interpersonal relationships with their own family and friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).



**Figure 1.** The levels of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) applied to the RET work context.

These demographic inclusions are critical elements of each person's biographical journey with regard to the RET role.

At the mesosystem level are the interrelationships of the RET with the student/s and the family who employ them, the other property employees, the teachers and staff from the distance education school, and other RETs to whom they are connected through networks. What transpires in the mesosystem affects the innermost system, being the microsystem, and the interrelationships within these two systems represent the immediate environmental setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). For example, experiences in the context of living on the property, with the family of whom they are employed within the local rural community, can impact on the everyday work in the schoolroom and vice versa. The bidirectional nature of the interactions of the microsystem and mesosystem impact on the RET through their educational partnerships and personal connections (Perron, 2017).

Beyond the boundaries of the first two systems resides the exosystem level, where there is no direct interaction with the RET, but which is instead an extension of the mesosystem in ways that impact personally and professionally. Constituents of the exosystem include the distance education sector, geographically isolated environments, and contextual impacts and circumstances. In other words, influences in this system emanate from distance education school policy changes, local natural disasters such

as drought, floods and fire, the employing family's financial stability and industry partnerships such as distance education jurisdictions and the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA).

The macrosystem level incorporates the overarching culture that is shaped by government educational policy according to political ideology, established by societal values, and represented by the media's educational expectations that impact on the RET's opportunities and resource accessibility. For example, the availability of a reliable internet infrastructure for the provision of online lessons is essential, as is financial subsidisation for family affordance to employ a RET.

The universal socio-ecological model representing Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) systems illustrates what constitutes the complexity of the reciprocal interactions that occur between people and their environment (Bluteau et al., 2017). This theoretical model has been used previously by Crawford et al. (2022) to afford insights into the challenges of learning online, and by Hickey et al. (2012) to find information about nursing students' and graduates' career development. Dillon-Wallace (2021) used the model across the rural educational context to illustrate the nexus among sociocultural, political and economic influences that impact on school and community functioning. Accordingly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) socio-ecological systems theory applies logically and naturally to the current study as an analytical framework for contextualising educational careers in rural and remote settings.

## Research design

In an endeavour to articulate the voices of Australian geographically isolated RETs, this qualitative research was designed to capture the rich and comprehensive perceptions of the participants (University Human Research Ethics Approval Number: H21REA241). The research design was implemented as a practical approach to enquire into how RETs, working in geographically isolated locations, self-reported their contexts, experiences and aspirations in their occupational roles. Extending from a foundation of previous research (McLennan et al., 2022; Peel et al., 2022), this more in-depth study deliberately adopted a pragmatic approach that focuses on an inquiry to address the research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). As such, the involvement and experiences of four participants was deemed suitable given the anticipation of the rich volume of data to be elicited from interviews.

The following research question addressed the under-researched issue situated in the context of rural and remote schooling, and specifically in the provision of distance education, in Australia: What are the perceptions of the impact of remote education tutoring on the RETs' lifestyles, experiences and decisions? Given this overarching question, four underlying inquiries were designed to probe the data, guide the analysis and focus the findings within the distance education context:

1. What do RETs identify as the knowledge and skills that they require for their position?
2. What are the integral relationships and expectations that the RETs experience?
3. How do RETs report about the rewards and challenges of their varied roles?

4. Which avenues secure capable RETs in geographically isolated locations when there is a limited supply?

The participants in this research were working in school rooms located on geographically isolated properties. The researchers travelled to the geographically isolated properties by four-wheel drive vehicle and helicopter, as it was important to situate the data collection in authentic rural and remote settings. The participants' perceptions about their experiences as a RET were investigated in-depth within these work contexts that were all located within the Capricornia and Central Highlands Regions, Queensland, Australia. The researchers had developed a network within this specific region to enable the logistics of accessing these remote locations. Four properties in total were visited and were selected according to the researchers' extensive networks within that region. The volunteer participants ( $N=4$ ) were RETs, employed by the family of the geographically isolated students.

An interview protocol was established to provide the researchers with an efficient procedure to manage time, follow ethical considerations, promote flow of conversations and maintain consistency of questioning. The researchers introduced themselves to the participant, provided a background to the research that was outlined on the Participant Information form, and disclosed their interest in the study. The format of the interview was explained, and an opportunity was provided for the participant to ask procedural questions, prior to requesting permission to proceed, before beginning the recording.

The data collection method involved semi-structured interviews where key questions were asked according to the way in which the discussion flowed. The rationale for adopting the semi-structured interviews was to elicit understandings from the RET participants. A semi-structured interview is a style of questioning that is guided by topics rather than as a sequence of pre-planned questions (Glesne, 2011). The semi-structured interview questions were designed around a set of themes or guiding topics, rather than as a sequence of pre-planned questions. The initial question aimed to generate the informal tone of the conversation by asking the RET to think about a good day in the schoolroom and to recall what made this satisfying.

The topics were outlined in the interview protocol and were related to their career pathway, productivity, accountability, volition, belonging, professional learning and contentedness in the role. For example, with regard to career pathway, the following question provided an opportunity for the RET to reflect on the personal journey into the role: What initially led you to the position of RET? Alternatively, for the topic of productivity, the RET was asked an open-ended response about the features of the workspace: Describe your schoolroom and what in it enables you to meet the outcomes that are required. Having the flexibility to adjust the order of questions provided opportunities to probe for details and descriptions, while still controlling the focus and timing of the one-hour interview. At the conclusion of the interview, photographs of the schoolroom were taken to capture its ambience, as well as of artefacts that were deemed of significance to the unique setting. These images provided the researchers with data for visual analysis to encapsulate the contextual features of the



location that supported the interview data. The data were collected over a one-week time duration.

The qualitative interpretive methodology provided access to rich, descriptive data that enabled the researchers to form meanings and understandings about the experiences of the RETs. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and stored with the supporting photographic images. The thematic data analysis followed the rigorous method outlined as the six-stage data collection and analysis (Peel, 2020) that included: (1) collecting; (2) engaging with; (3) coding; (4) generating the code categories; (5) conceptualising the themes; and (6) contextualising and representing the findings, via Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) socio-ecological systems theory in the discussion.

The researchers' initial engagement with the transcripts identified and compared patterns, commonalities and differences. Coding was undertaken through researcher collaboration and discussion to identify extracts from the transcripts that were of significance to the pre-established descriptors. These descriptors were drawn from the Personal and Professional Perceptions Scale (PPPS), an organic measure developed and employed in Phase 1 of the Capricornia Project (Peel et al., 2022), and assisted in the analysis by providing insights into the position of the RETs. The descriptors, which were defined in precise terms as represented in Table 1, afforded groupings for the inductively generated codes.

The codes provided the building blocks for identifying patterns of meaning in the data, underpinned by the descriptors as the central organising concepts. The expanding list of codes emerged from the key ideas that were located in the transcribed interview data and that were labelled to represent their meanings. The researchers described the intent of each code from the participant RET's perspective for the purpose of clarifying the code's meaning for future coding consistency (Peel, 2020). For example, the code, *Internet Instability (IIN)*, was defined: *RET describes the issues associated with internet interruptions*. At this stage, the analysis relied on the researchers' interpretations of the data, as they made inferences about the RETs' interview responses.

Following this iterative coding process, the tentative list of codes was reviewed and consolidated where required, some coded extracts were re-coded, then all 89 codes were aggregated into 14 categories that encapsulated mutual and aligned content. These categories were then interrogated for their suitability to respond to each of the four inquiries, which in turn collectively addressed the overarching research question.

**Table 1.** Descriptors and definitions for the initial grouping of the codes.

Descriptors	Definitions
Temporal Comfortability	Meeting the time demands of the work.
Accountability	Being responsible for work to meet expectations.
Social Wellness	Feeling fulfilment through social interactions at work.
Contentedness	Feeling a sense of satisfaction with work.
Resilience	Being able to adapt to meet the demands of work.
Belonging	Feeling a sense of place in the work environment.
Productivity	Being able to engage to meet the work demands.
Volition	Being able to self-direct the work strategically.
Versatility	Being able to apply an array of skills in the work environment.

Ultimately, themes for each inquiry were conceptualised as the findings. Four themes were generated from the patterns in the codes and categories that presented the findings as resolutions to these inquiries. The conceptualised themes were then consolidated through sourcing existing literature to substantiate the new knowledge. In this final phase of analysis, to contextualise and represent the findings in a discussion, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) psychological perspective for understanding human behaviour provided the conceptual lens that is aligned with the location of the research in the interpretivist research paradigm (Carr & Kemmis, 2003).

## Participants

The four participants were recruited to represent a sample of the employed RETs who work in geographically isolated locations in Australia. A pseudonym identified each of the participants, who are introduced through their journey to the job. All four of these RETs grew up with strong ties to rural living, but never on the scale of remoteness that they experienced in these roles. The voice of these participants is privileged in these collective findings and is explicitly showcased through selected extracts from the data coded in the *participant background*. An introduction to the participants' backgrounds follows that includes the context of their work as a RET, what attracted them to the position, their connection to rurality and their work perceptions.

### Miss Anna

Anna works on a large cattle property (over 36,000 hectares) as a RET (and calls herself a *govie*) with two children aged six and eight, and has been employed by the family for eighteen months. Previous to this, Anna worked in childcare and stated, "I loved it, but I did it for six years, so I was looking for something new and different." Having grown up on a farm, she went to primary school in a small town, prior to attending boarding school for her secondary school education. Anna expressed, "I love seeing children grow and develop .... I had heard about being a *govie* but did not really know the full extent of what we had to do. Probably I did go into it a little bit blindly, not knowing the full responsibility." Recognising that "actually this is what I want to do", Anna reflected that she would be a home tutor long term, "but there's nowhere where it [career] goes." Consequently, whilst fulfilling the RET role, she is studying to be a qualified teacher to work overseas in the future.

### Miss Erin

Erin works on a cattle property (over 26,000 hectares) with two children aged four and five, and is in her first year as an RET (and calls herself a *govie*). She grew up on a dairy farm before shifting to a regional town for her secondary school education but "always loved station life". Her first employment was in administration for a distance education school, which gave her some insight into the role of the RET, but she remembers "this one day someone called and said, 'We're looking for a *govie*' .... I'm like, I have no idea where to look." Erin recalled, "My cousin used to work as a

govie but I never really understood”, and this prompted Erin’s “love [for] working with kids .... It’s fascinating watching what they can do.” Erin expressed that she has always had a “leaning towards the teaching side of things” and was invited out by her current employer “to come and have a look, see what it’s like.”

### **Miss Ally**

Ally works as a RET (and calls herself a *govie*) on a large cattle property (over 42,000 hectares) with two children aged 6 and 10, and has been employed by the family for one year. Ally grew up on a cattle and sheep property herself, one hour’s drive from a regional centre. After finishing school, she explained, “I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, and so spontaneously... I was talking to one of my friends [working as a RET], who’s up here with another family ... and she said, ‘Just do it, it’s good, it’s a new experience.’” The property lifestyle was not unfamiliar to Ally who stated, “I knew a lot of it, so it wasn’t new as such. It’s obviously a new place and everything.” She enjoys the company of the other workers on the property and uses her spare time looking ahead towards a teaching degree “doing uni part-time and online, and continu[ing] governessing.”

### **Miss Yana**

Yana works as a RET (and calls herself a *govie*) on a remote cattle property (over 10,000 hectares) with three children aged 5, 7 and 8, and has been employed by the family for one year. Yana “grew up on a small hobby farm” and “went to a little primary school .... Mum was actually my principal.” With older sisters working as a teacher aide and an early childhood educator, Yana jested, “So I guess it’s in the family. We all love kids.” Yana was aware “as a little girl ... of govies.” When she visited a family friend’s station, they always said to her, “You would be a great govie. You would love it.” Yana admitted, “I always wanted to go west.” In addition to working in the property schoolhouse, she has plans for the future: “I’m doing a Bachelor of Agriculture and then I’ll do my Master of Education.” Yana considered this to be “the best of both worlds; you get to be in the ag [agriculture] sector and you get to be in the classroom with kids. It’s two very different things being combined into one.”

Given the participants’ contribution, the transcribed interview data were analysed through the four inquiries that underlined the overarching research question guided the data analysis. Importantly, the data extracts provided the evidence that ensured the rigour of the findings aligned to the purpose of this research.

## **Findings**

This research identified the RETs’ perceptions of the impact of remote education tutoring on their lifestyles, experiences and decisions. The coded data were analysed to generate code categories and were arranged to enable the researchers to distinguish the characteristics of each category and the participants’ biographical

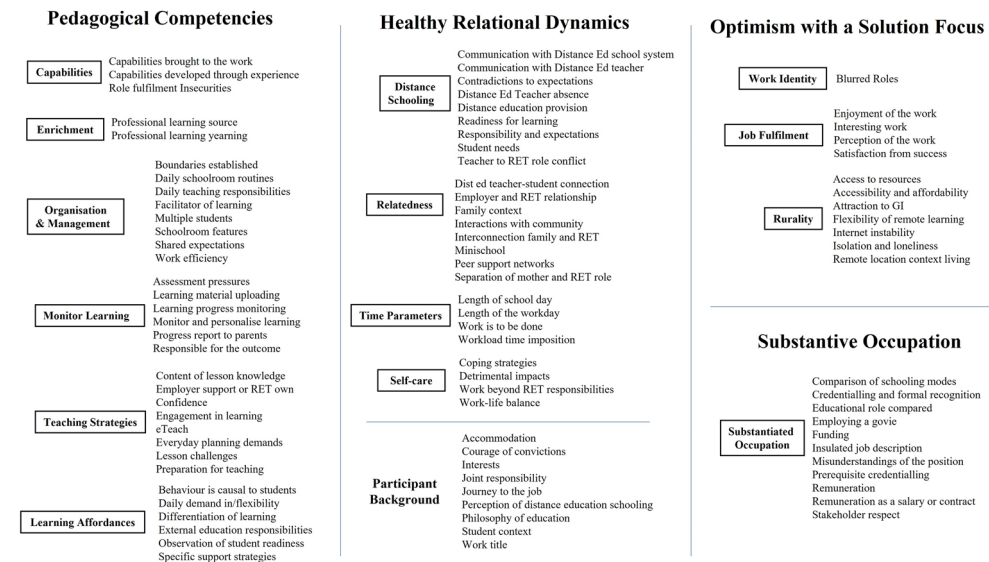


Figure 2. Working summary of the themes and the categorisation of their respective codes.

background. The 14 code categories were associated with the inquiries to address the overarching research question. Figure 2 illustrates the four distinctive themes that emerged from the categorisation of the codes: pedagogical competencies; healthy relational dynamics; optimism with a solution focus; and substantive occupation.

The findings are presented through the themes and the corresponding inquiries, with the support of the data extracts from the transcribed semi-structured interviews, to substantiate the researchers' interpretations.

### ***Pedagogical competencies***

The RETs' work involved them working in an educational role (McLennan et al., 2022; Newman, 2014; Peel et al., 2022) and necessitated a high level of adaptability when performing significant teaching tasks (Downes & Roberts, 2015). In the study, the RETs identified the knowledge and skills that they require for their position to include a complexity of pedagogical competencies that are described through their six code categories: capabilities; seeking enrichment; organisation and management; readiness to monitor learning; teaching strategies; and implementation of learning affordances to meet the needs of the learners in their schoolroom.

The RETs' **capabilities** are actively constructed as they draw on experiences through their immersion in the schoolroom. Ally explained, "Like, you think you're not learning, but you are learning every day how to do different things." They demonstrated a desire to know, a determination to meet the expectations and the capacity to reconcile the heavy workload that absorbs the burden of expectations. Reinforcement of the capabilities requires regular feedback to strengthen their self-belief and to expand their learning from others.

The RETs seek **enrichment** that is pedagogical in nature. Vicarious learning is accessed through sharing ideas from various sources – in particular, self-initiated intra-networks of RETs. Anna reflected on an opportunity that she had for learning from the parent, who was a trained teacher:

I was sort of watching her for a couple of days because I had never taught before. She [the parent] showed me how she did it and she's like, obviously I didn't have to do it that way, but I realised how important it was and how it really helped.

It is argued that self-belief extends from past successful experiences (Bandura, 1997) when emulating their learning in the schoolroom and when adapting professional learning that is largely targeted for school classrooms. Distance schooling administers professional development at formal gatherings, termed *minischool*, that focus on core learning to orientate new RETs, with upskilling that appears to be more ad hoc than targeted to individuals in its provision.

The **organisation and management** are led by the RETs, who share the responsibilities of the schoolroom, through orchestrating purposeful, goal orientated learning, following a planned and structured day, monitoring the completion progress using checklists, framing the expectations, implementing cueing systems, and motivating through and responding to verbal persuasion. This extends from the establishment of clear routines for consistency, such as at the start of the school day, that allow flexibility of management to complete the requirements of the daily programmed timetable. Yana described a typical start to the day, "I make sure everything's set up, organised. I have all of the girls' work on their desk, so everything's planned. Then we do our morning routine ... getting them ready for on air." In essence, time is valued owing to the demands of learning and the necessity to upload the completed work for the distance education teacher to monitor as formative assessment. Weekly to daily planning timetables are comprehensive and layered to cater for the multi-tasking of multiple students. In the simulated schoolroom, the spaces and resources of a school classroom are purposefully replicated to enhance learning opportunities. Wall displays and seating arrangements are managed for engaging and personalising learning.

The RETs oversee the teaching, and, as such, are positioned well to **monitor learning**. They grapple with the time pressure imposed for the daily uploading of what is extensive completed work required by the distance education system. The level of expectation with this requirement equates to a degree of pressure experienced by the RET, and the protocol of *no support permitted for summative assessment* is conflicting. As Yana conceded, "Assessments are really hard because you're so used to coaching them and guiding them and being right there and they're so dependent on you .... 'Oh, sorry, here's a piece of paper, do it.'" As a pseudo family member, RETs need to exercise discerning and sensitive judgements, to be formally and informally reported to parents, through conversations for problem-solving and progress. This can be represented as a learning measure of distance travelled or as a point in time evaluation.

The RETs are undeniably implementing and designing **teaching strategies** that go beyond the supervision of learning to meet the individual student needs. As such, there is a daily responsibility of planning and resourcing for the effective functioning of the schoolroom. Teaching via the distance schooling provision is internet reliant, as synchronous online teaching, and requires the overt supervision of the RET's

presence and follow up lessons. When planning provision from the distance schooling is transparent, in the form of term overviews and lesson plans, the RET can provide the necessary continuity of learning and teaching. This is not always the case, as Anna explained, “Having teacher notes ... a lesson plan ... having the PowerPoint [slides] that they want the kids to do, but actually the teaching that you’re going to do and to get them to that point ... that would be very beneficial.” This planning still requires interventions that compensate for internet issues, disengaging materials, distance schooling staff absence and insufficient timely forward planning from teachers. Time inefficiency occurs when there is uncertainty about the intended learning and how it is to be taught. For example, eTeach provision from distance schooling, as an alternative asynchronous recorded lesson to online synchronous teaching, presents issues with learning engagement to the RET that becomes a void to be filled, and means that goal setting for learning motivation is required.

The RETs acknowledged that if they want students to engage in learning they must draw on **learning affordances** to motivate them. Examples of how they do this is through consequential rewards, emulation of others’ work, hands-on learning and shared time management for goal attainment. Ally enthused, “I like always engaging and I just love seeing the ways that people create hands-on activities ... creating those hands-on things for them to learn at first.”

### ***Healthy relational dynamics***

RETs’ healthy relational dynamics are based on trust that emanates from developing interpersonal connections within the context of the distance schooling system. Within this context, there are multiple stakeholders who strive to meet the common objective of educating the learner (Peel et al., 2022). In this study, the RETs described the integral relationships and expectations that they experience that are directly linked to four code categories, two of which were selected to describe for this theme: distance schooling context; and relatedness as sense of belonging and purpose (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

The **distance schooling** model operationalises both the fundamental teaching and the resource provision that facilitate the RETs’ capacity to act as a conduit between the distance education teacher and the learner. Communication is predominantly through email with the limitations of time obvious, as opposed to telephone conversations and minischool meetups, where a responsive dynamic exists. Ally recalled, “She [the teacher] sent me an email and said, ‘Thank you for all the hard work and asking for extra things.’ She’s an amazing teacher. She’s been very supportive to me.” Whilst the planning is conveyed from the teacher’s perspective, and includes term overviews, non-negotiable expectations and lesson content, it is the RET who enacts the student learning engagement. The perspectives of the teachers and RETs are varied, where the RET has a clear understanding of the distinctiveness of their school-room context and makes decisions about the appropriate level of supervision. Timely provision of planning enables the RET to meet the demands confidently, given the density of the work to cover, and to adapt adequately to the circumstances when the formal lessons are inaccessible.

The code category of **relatedness** encompassed the multiple relationships, based on trust, that are shared among the supervising RETs, the children in the schoolroom, the parents as the employers, the distance education teacher and the other RETs with whom they network. Notwithstanding the pressure of employers and distance schooling expectations and deadlines, the RET requires honest communication and acknowledgement for reassurance to build and maintain a positive mindset. At a formal and an informal level, ongoing and consistently timed communication determines the mutual satisfaction of the work undertaken. The value of the RET's relationship with the parents of the children is the main link and is essential for empowerment, as Ally reinforced by stating, "... they [the parents] are very supportive of me, which is amazing." The employer's understanding of the complexity of the job is imperative, as there is an interconnection among home, school, work and personal life that is challenging to differentiate. The RET is absorbed into the family so that a close friendship is generally forged, making it awkward for the RET when the time arrives to leave the family. Parents, who enable life opportunities beyond the schoolroom, support the RET through property activities that enhance the bond with the children, and via introductions within the community, people and events. Beyond the family, support networks are valued and are often set up by experienced RETs that promote conversations to build confidence. Formal gatherings at minischool enable communication with the distance education teachers for feedback and problem-solving, and provide a forum that consolidates networks with other RETs that lead to social groups and chats. Yana summarised, "I think that's the thing with us govies; we all connect, and we all try and message each other, talk to each other; we are like a teachers' social group really."

### ***Optimism with a solution focus***

As distance schooling in geographically isolated locations requires RETs to live on the properties with those who employ them, they confront and overcome challenges associated with the work identity issue of separating their education work and family life (Newman, 2014). With optimism and a solution focused mindset, they derive a feeling of job fulfilment from their varied experiences through their interactions at work (Peel et al., 2022). The RETs knowingly make decisions to reside on the properties with an understanding of the distinctive issues associated with rurality (Downes & Roberts, 2018). In this study, the RETs described the rewards and challenges that they face during the daily events of their varied roles through three code categories.

The **identity** issue of role separation for the RETs is a consequence of their immersion in the context of the schoolroom and beyond, where a clear line between these spheres protects privacy. Erin articulated, "The schoolroom is schoolwork. When we are at home, we play." Respectful relationships are forged from a clear understanding with ultimately a trust of the RET by the employer, who hosts the RET as a pseudo family member. Nevertheless, the power differential remains with the parents, who have the final say.

The RETs' **job fulfilment** is represented by personal satisfaction from their observations of student learning success. Motivation is drawn from the variation in everyday tasks, with an emphasis on fun and enjoyment during learning. Ally described a positive learning environment, "It's everyone really having fun and obviously you've got to get the work done ... enjoying and everyone laughing .... A good schoolroom



is being able to make your activities fun.” Engaging actively in hands-on and face-to-face interactive learning is fulfilling, irrespective of the daily challenges. The experience of students transferring and applying previous learning elsewhere is rewarding.

**Rurality** as a code category pertains to characteristics that are rural specific and include remote living in often isolated locations. This can challenge the RETs, who are required to move a considerable distance from family and friends, and necessitates the forging of new relationships. Given the nuances of the geographical isolation, the RETs self-reflect on their experiences, lifestyle and decision-making to confirm a purpose. Erin mused as she reflected on living in an isolated location, “When people ask, I always just say, ‘It’s great’ .... I’m really enjoying what I’m doing ... there’s challenges. Sometimes I’m like, what am I doing? But it’s really good ... fascinating. But then seeing the kids grow.” Barriers such as having to forward plan and internet instability create uncertainty and compromise the meeting of expectations that necessitates problem-solving, which in itself is a reward. The RET may forego the convenience of services for social connections, which can be substituted with like experiences and the reward of weekend getaways.

### ***Remote education tutor as a substantive occupation***

In this study, the RETs identified the surprising lack of awareness of the general public about their occupation (Pini & Mills, 2015), the lack of formal qualifications required and the non-existence of credentialing opportunities (McLennan et al., 2022; Newman, 2014; Peel et al., 2022). As such, the code category **substantiated occupation** illuminated the RETs’ struggle for their role to be recognised as a legitimate occupation with a sustainable career pathway for those who wish to pursue one. Moreover, the RETs provided insights into the avenues that need to be available to secure capable employees in geographically isolated locations when there exists a limited supply (Douglas, 2019).

The position of the RET is often misrepresented and associated with childcare positions of employment, such as a *nanny* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b). Anna lamented, “Because it’s not a recognised position, you can put it on your resume but there’s no accreditation from our job that we do .... You just hope that you have a good reference from the family to move on.” Significantly, the skills of an educator that are required for the RET job bring about the distinctiveness of the position in its own right. This is demonstrated through the evidence of the RETs’ close comparison to the role of the teacher with the depth of responsibility for the implementation of the planning for learning. Yana recounted her surprise, “I didn’t think that it would be this much work. No way, no way! I thought, ‘You’ll do fun stuff, you’ll go and teach’. I didn’t realise that you’re actually really doing, say, a teacher’s role.”

In the general population, there is limited appreciation and understanding of the work that is performed and of the full accountability that comes with this substantiated occupation. Even those who are connected to the work are often unfamiliar with the demands involved, as Erin indicated, “I’ve worked in distance ed [education] and I had a small understanding. But it wasn’t until I got here [the property]; I was like, ‘Oh, my goodness!’” Given this, the RET position has not been able to gain traction as a recognised occupation; hence there is no existing remuneration scale. Yana



reinforced the variation on what are unregulated wages, “I work an eight-hour day, but I know some people who are on less than me, working 12-hour days, every day, plus weekend sport.” Raising awareness of the position and what it entails would lift the profile, in combination with formal qualifications that align with the job of the RET. Widespread aspirations to gain a career pathway, through certification and recognition of prior experiences, are valued by the RETs. Ally disclosed, “I’m doing Pathways [tertiary preparation] at the moment, to then go into my early childhood and primary [undergraduate studies].”

## Discussion

In this discussion, we explore the themes identified in the data findings from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) socio-ecological systems theory. The current study used each of the layers inherent in the socio-ecological model, identifying the relevant contextual influences, to explain the impact of remote education tutoring on the RETs’ lifestyles, experiences and decisions (see [Figure 2](#)). This discussion synthesises the findings in response to the overarching research question, through responding to the four inquiries.

The RETs identified the knowledge and skills that they require for their position to include pedagogical competencies. These competencies are acquired from both their personalised on-the-job experiences and external sources of professional influence, such as their relationships with other RETs, employers, and distance education teachers and staff. This represents a convergence of the micro- and mesosystems in the RETs’ specific work contexts, and recognises the consistent ongoing action and reflection that the RETs use to determine how they build their capacity.

The RETs described the integral relationships and expectations that they experience for healthy relational dynamics. These interrelationships, based on trust, are developed out of necessity, through the connections that are established between the RETs and those who are committed to the education of the geographically isolated student. These relational dynamics emanate from the mesosystem, as close sources of influence, and include partnerships with the employer, the family, the network of fellow RETs, and the distance education teachers and staff.

The RETs conveyed the rewards and challenges that they face through the daily events of their varied roles with optimism and a solution focus. The influences of the exosystem, such as the distance education sector, geographically isolated environment and the broader contextual impacts, require the RET to function within circumstances that are derived from the larger social system. Recognising these influences as powerful entities, the RETs embrace a resilient approach that is required to thrive in their unique workplace.

The RETs provided insights into the avenues for establishing their position as a substantive occupation. It is these insights that reinforce the need for a clear career pathway to secure capable workers in geographically isolated locations, where there exists a limited supply of RETs. The macrosystem’s government policy demands the mandated adult supervision for distance education students, but in many ways overlooks how it is to be resourced. It is within this macrosystem that reform is required, and an educational pathway that articulates a framework for customised qualifications is proposed to establish RET credentialling. This proposed credential should recognise and develop the knowledge and skills that are specific to the schoolroom context of

the home-based educator, and should include practical requirements that recognise proficiency from prior experience.

### **Conclusion: limitations as recommendations**

Although the semi-structured interviews for this study were rigorous and robust, they were limited to four participants. It is evident that this is a small representation among a large cohort of RET workers across Australia, and warrants a mention with respect to generalisability. Additionally, the location of the RETs were constrained geographically to the Capricornia Region of Queensland, Australia. In future studies, value could be added by recruiting participants from diverse locations across various distance schooling jurisdictions to strengthen the depth and diversity of the findings.

Further, this research focused upon just one distinctive group of RETs, that being the externally employed or outsourced workers. Future research would do well to include the immediate family representatives of the RET cohort, generally the mothers of the children, in a comparative study to determine similarities and differences of professional and personal perceptions.

Accepting the significant impact that RETs make to distance education, it is critical that further investigation be undertaken towards the development of a recognised career pathway. This study has found that the RET contributes indispensably to the educational success and the lifestyle sustainability of the school age children with whom they work. Yet, currently, there is no formal recognition of that contribution, nor employment status or security of a recognised occupation. Additionally, there are limited learning opportunities to develop professional proficiency, nor exists a viable career pathway for RETs seeking to become qualified teachers. Therefore, in essence, RETs are as occupationally invisible (Peel et al., 2022) as the remote living families whom they serve.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to the Remote Education Tutors who took part in this research. We would also like to acknowledge the reviewers who provided insightful comments in an earlier version of the manuscript.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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