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CPL Podcast: Beginning Teaching in Country Schools K-12

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Cathy Jeffrey

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the CPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the CPL Podcast for the Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland. I'm the Assistant Director of the CPL. Today, I'm talking with Cath Jeffrey about teaching in a country school and about life as part of the community in regional New South Wales.

Carly Boreland:

Cath welcome.

Cath Jeffrey:

Thank you.

Carly Boreland:

Can you tell us about you? You are at Inverell and I wonder, how did you come to be there and how is it to be there?

Cath Jeffrey:

Originally, I lived in Dubbo then moved to Ballina, started university when my youngest child was about three weeks old, started externally through the University of New England. My husband came out to Inverell to do a job as a carpet layer. I stayed in Ballina for about 12 months, and then we decided to move to Inverell because his job was working out quite well, moved to Inverell, continued to study and then was fortunate enough once I'd finished my pracs at the local high school, the two local high schools. And when I finished my degree was very fortunate to land a full-time job. It was a temp job for 12 months and then got offered a full-time permanent position.

Carly Boreland:

Okay. So how long have you been, you're at Inverell high school? Is that right?

Cath Jeffrey:

Yes.

Carly Boreland:

And how long have you been there for?

Cath Jeffrey:

I started there 2005 permanent, 2006.



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Carly Boreland:

Wow. And hey, do you know, that's the same as me.

Cathy Jeffrey:

Good.

Carly Boreland:

And you're a head teacher of Teaching and Learning.

Cath Jeffrey:

That's correct.

Carly Boreland:

And what's your background before that? What were you teaching before that?

Cath Jeffrey:

HSIE qualified. So, History and Geography, very fortunate to be given the opportunity to start Aboriginal studies. From there, it started off a Year 9 elective and we have now built it up. So, it's 9, 10, 11, and 12. So offered both Stage 5 and Stage 6. So that's where a lot of my teaching is as being the only Aboriginal Studies teacher. It can be a little bit lonely. Just being, I suppose a specialist teacher in that area, you do a lot of things on your own, but yeah, that's my history.

Carly Boreland:

There's so many things there in your experience, that must be like so many teachers in public schools, all over New South Wales, being the only teacher of a subject, finding yourself moving around for other family reasons and then deciding where will I settle? Where's the place for us? And then how can I be a teacher there?

Cath Jeffrey:

And I think you, you take opportunities when they present themselves. I remember when I got offered the full-time position, I was originally just going to, my daughter still hadn't started school, but it was one of those opportunities that you can't pass up. So yeah. I, was full-time there and it's nice because both my kids have gone through the school. So, there's that extra, extra tie to the school.

Carly Boreland:

So your family is completely connected to the high school?

Cath Jeffrey:

Definitely.

Carly Boreland:

And is that a good thing?



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Cath Jeffrey:

It can raise its challenges. It has its benefits. If you forget to sign a note, it's cool because the kids can just come to your classroom. It is difficult to have that break or I find, especially when you're at the school and you're in a small community and it's whether or not, it doesn't matter if you have kids or not, it's, it's in that small community, you're visible. You, without sounding weird, it's you're kind of always on. So, like you'll get approached at the club or the supermarket and, and that can be a little bit draining sometimes.

Carly Boreland:

Yeah. And I, I remember that for myself. I started teaching in the Illawarra. It's not far away from anywhere and it's not an especially small place, but I would see the kids at the beach when I was swimming and they are just saying hi, but they're around. And you know, you feel like a celebrity when you go out for dinner because they all serve you at the restaurants and things like that.

Cath Jeffrey:

I think too it's, especially in this day and age with social media, or where people feel that they can always contact you. So, you can find, you know, your parent teacher interview, you can be anywhere, you know, park, run and that can get a little bit draining sometimes because I've had to say myself, you know, that we have to make an appointment at the school because you don't want to be having, you know, blurring those social lines.

Carly Boreland:

I think navigating, navigating social media for teachers is just becoming complex no matter where you are in the world. But managing parent expectations has always been a challenge, I think. And I guess social media just adds one more layer.

Cath Jeffrey:

I think because there's that sentiment, and I've noticed definitely, probably in the last five years is, is that expectation that you are always available.

Carly Boreland:

But now I can imagine with the kind of constant need for, for updates, it's almost like a micro assessment of the child.

Cath Jeffrey:

And I think it's also an assessment of you. I think, you know, in other professions, you don't go to the doctor to teach them, you know, tell them how to diagnose you, but everyone's been to school. So, I think that everybody has an opinion as to what a good teacher is and I find people feel, I don't know if justified is the word, but to definitely offer their opinion.

Carly Boreland:

And that could be hard if, if they're also in your town and then you see them all the time as well. So then they might offer that opinion more than you would appreciate.



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Cath Jeffrey:

It's definitely once you have kids too. So, if you think like, you know, if your child's and that's where you become a contact, so it's like, oh, I know such and such, her kid dances with my kids. So, then they will raise stuff there. In a small country town that can be, that's an extra layer, I think. And, I think that's really, so if you're looking at when you, especially our young teachers, so when you move to a country town, if you're first out of, out of university, you join the footy club, you join the cricket club to, to make friends, but then that can become a little bit of a minefield if you've got those 16, 17 year old's, so young men or young women. So, it turns into that social situation. So, it can be yeah, a little bit challenging to navigate that.

Carly Boreland:

What are your tips for that? Because when we were talking about this podcast, we were kind of torn because on the one hand, we want it to be about all of the benefits of working in rural settings and country schools of which I hope you'll tell me about the, all the many advantages. But we want to keep it real as well. And there, there are disadvantages for students, in their, in their school career from being further away from cities. And there are challenges for teachers. And like you said, especially new teachers who, you know, have a hard time anyway, and then have the extra layers of lifestyle and how to, how to have fun and be true to yourself, but also maintain your ethical responsibilities as well. So, what, what do you think, how, how do we do this best?

Cath Jeffrey:

I think you need to first and foremost, establish boundaries very early, have those conversations, even like, say, say when you join a team or you're joining a club that they will automatically know that you are the teacher, it'll be all around, you know, because you'll hit town and that'll go around town as to, as to your role. But I think if you show the initiative and be proactive, having those conversations helps to dispel any, I think, potential incidences that may come up. So, I think if you're proactive, deal with it, set your boundaries, it just makes it easier. You're kind of cutting it off at the pass before those issues. The other side too, like that's a fantastic way for you become a very valued member of the community. So that's, that's a huge benefit is I find it just compared to my experiences when I moved from Dubbo to Ballina, I was, I suppose, a regular Joe, you don't know who's a local solicitor. You don't know all that stuff, but when you're a teacher, as soon as you're immersed in that school community, you're kind of, not accepted, but yeah, you make those friendships and relationships quite quickly, which is great. It it'll alleviate some of that loneliness that can come when you do move to a new town. But it's, I think it's just about if you be proactive and if you be honest, just, you know, having those conversations where, once I explained to a couple of people, you know, under our code of conduct and et cetera, et cetera, we can't do this and people go, oh, okay I didn't realise.

Carly Boreland:

Exactly. And that comes back to everyone. Beginning teaching and throughout is to know and uphold your high standards and responsibilities. And that, that goes through all kinds of different situations that people might find themselves in, in schools. And, so if you had to have a top five of being a teacher in Inverell and living there as well, what, what's your top five?



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Cath Jeffrey:

I would say the respect, if you're seen as being hardworking, definitely the relationships. I think the intensity of that, I have an alumni now of students who I consider friends. And I think you really get to build that ability to change, like make changes. I know through our Aboriginal Studies, where we use a community example of, of people who were fringe dwellers, living on the fringes of town, and we've actually, through the school, been able to celebrate that aspect of history and we've seen change in the community where people themselves now, now go, oh, that's really valuable. So that's been a big, positive. Country towns are great, like I raised my children here, the opportunities that they got, yes, you have to travel a little bit more, but the opportunities that they have through sport and dance and performing arts is fantastic. It's cheap, very much cheaper to live in a country town. And yeah. You make lifelong friendships.

Carly Boreland:

Yeah. And you're, I like how you say you become a valued member of the community and you, you fit in and build those relationships fast. Like you're not a regular Joe as you put it, and that can be in itself really rewarding. Have you been able to do things in the town because of your status as a teacher that you maybe wouldn't have done in other towns?

Cath Jeffrey:

What I like is that I feel that I'm invested in the local history that, that the stuff that I do at the school is actually valued. So if you imagine that Inverell High has been around since 1936, a lot of the town's invested in, in the high school and I think they like to see, and then that gives, you know, so what we've got, all those authentic relationships and, and building kudos for your school, it's, it's a privilege that I don't think that you would get if you perhaps were not so invested in the community and also you get to like you get to bond with and utilise different aspects of the community. Like we do a lot of work with our Chamber of Commerce, we, like local businesses as well as different entities and that comes through, oh, I know such and such she works there. So, I think also if you, you do those initial relationships, you can then build on those and that just expands to network.

Carly Boreland:

We can't spend too much time talking only about the country town-ness of being a teacher in rural New South Wales. We got to talk about the pedagogy as well. And you've had experience beginning and then bringing through lots of teachers, at, at your place, at your school. Can you give us some advice on how teachers can fit into the community? And most importantly, fit in as someone who teaches well in a country school?

Cath Jeffrey:

I think it's important not to take on too much, especially if you're a beginner teacher, I see sometimes in an effort to make friends, et cetera, et cetera. I think you really need to spend that time honing your craft. One aspect, which is perhaps unique is use your strengths. I've found the background knowledge of families is something that you really need to learn and it's not, it's not local gossip, people say, oh, you know, it's local gossip. It's not, it's, it's knowing your students. And if we're looking at the standard that, that Standard One, that everyone throws out, know your students and how they learn. Well, I think when you're looking at having that family history is really important. So, I think spend some time to get to know your students, but also get to know the town. And



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if you look at it, you can again use your strengths because then you realise, oh, such and such has got expertise in here. Let's, get them into the school and that builds your classroom practice, but it also is fantastic for building resources. So, the more local resources you can use in your teaching, it also, again, adds, I don't know, what the right word is, I think it increases the way or the regard that the high school is held in and it then gives the community ownership in the curriculum. And when they, they feel that they have ownership of the curriculum, when the parents feel they have ownership in the curriculum, you're then being very proactive and I think that flows into the, into the classroom.

Carly Boreland:

Yeah. So you're, you're really using the community to build up together the students so that in a town like, like yours, it's that the school benefits when the community benefits and vice versa, we're not just making individuals to go off and live various exotic lives selfishly.

Cath Jeffrey:

I think it also, especially in a, in a country town, it sets your role models. So we do a lot of work in, in a couple of subjects where we work with the primary schools, but we also work with our preschools and you then see that you know, the children's said, oh, when I get to year nine, I want to do this. When I get to year 12, I want to do that. So that then raises, raises a lot of socioeconomic indicators, as well as, I think, the education level of the community as a whole, it's also really important in classroom management. I find that if you've made a positive relationship with parents, with members of the community, when you've got to have those conversations, that perhaps aren't nice, the fact that the first time you're contacting the parents or members of the community is not negative, or Johnny has been bad, but you've contacted them in that positive realm. So, then those difficult conversations that are easy to have because you've established a positive relationship initially.

Carly Boreland:

And that's, that's such good advice for everybody. Try to get to know your parents before the first conversation is a difficult one.

Cath Jeffrey:

Oh, and it's just something I tell a lot of beginner teachers, spend 20 minutes at the junior touch on a Wednesday afternoon. That way you can, you know, when someone comes into your classroom, you can say, oh, I saw you score that really good try. You don't have to be there for two hours, but it gives you something that you can, again, establish that relationship with your students. That's not based on reading chapter six and doing questions from page seven and eight.

Carly Boreland:

And trying to just be interested in the students, and as I used to ask a lot, what's your thing? What are you good at? Rather than feel like it has to always be about the particular thing you're doing at school right at this minute. And, and Cath, how do you get better at teaching when you're several hours from big cities and you still need to be as good as any of your peers, especially in COVID times where maybe travel has been difficult, or what do you do to keep getting better? Because we know that having a birthday doesn't make you better at teaching and



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more years, more years on class 9, don't make you better at class 9. Something has to happen in between. So, what do we do?

Cath Jeffrey:

I actually, this is going to sound really weird, but I'm grateful for COVID because I think COVID has shown, and especially for rural and remote people, that there's so many different ways that you can communicate. So I think it's dispelled that myth that we had to travel to Sydney to do this or that. I have even noticed in the Department now they've realised that there's people who can hold positions in curriculum development that perhaps were never offered before, because you had to live in Sydney and, and, go to work there. So COVID, I think has taught us that we don't need to be hamstrung by our location.

Carly Boreland:

And sorry, I was just going to say, Sydney doesn't have a monopoly on good ideas.

Cath Jeffrey:

No. And I think to become a better teacher, you've got to reflect, you've got to be honest. And sometimes you've got a cop it that you stuffed up, or you could have done that better. I think sometimes that people will look at a class list and go, I've got, you know, X, Y, Z, or especially in a in a country town. You have, you know, the kids that come from the feeder schools or people say this cohorts this, or, and I think that then preempts perhaps, or influences how you approach your teaching. So I think what you have to do is personalise it, because kids, these days, students, these days will call you if they don't feel you're honest, you don't have to be their friend, but you need to be honest and you need to be authentic because they can spot a fake. I think we've kind of, reaped what we sew in, in regard to, you know, from my age they used to say, kids are seen and not heard. Whereas the thing is now that they have a voice, you have to be prepared for that voice when it communicates, perhaps something that you did not want to hear.

Carly Boreland:

And look for the, maybe there is a little bit of truth sometimes that comes through.

Cath Jeffrey:

It's formative feedback. You know, we, we do formative feedback all the time with our students. I think that we need to do formative feedback with our practice.

Carly Boreland:

So, what about ways to give kids opportunities? You said that you found that students in the places you've been have got opportunities to be involved in creative arts and performing arts and things like that. What about as a teacher at the school, trying to organise some of these opportunities, are there some tips or tricks you can give us for how to, how to make your life easier in those, in those things? Because we want the best experiences for our students always, but we want them to be manageable for us too.



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Cath Jeffrey:

Definitely again. And I think COVID has taught us this. I've just got an email this morning, because I've been involved in School Spec, School Spectacular for, for many years. And I think they've realised now that we can use technology. So, I think that increases access to all students. Like it's expensive in a country town, everyone mucks in, like, I know we have fundraisers, and everyone will chip in to help the dancers go to Sydney. Or, and again, I think that also, it's not only the experience of going to say School Spec to perform, use it as, okay, here's a train timetable. When we get to Sydney, you've got to buy your Opal card, you've got to swipe your Opal card. You've got to work out. And so, it's also teaching them those life skills. So, the accessing opportunities is not just about the actual opportunity itself. It's about building those life skills because the thing is, if like a lot of our kids, if they go to Uni they will leave home. So that's an opportunity too, and again, you use your strengths. You'll have parents who will jump in. I've had two wonderful Mums that have come with me to School Spec for the last six years. And we've just got this awesome system. And that helps you, just rely on your community because they will jump in. And because it benefits everyone.

Carly Boreland:

I can imagine that in a, in a country town, a teacher might be one of the more well-paid people in the community. And so, there's a real need to find ways to make those opportunities equitably available for everybody.

Cath Jeffrey:

Yeah. That's a really important thing. And you have to be mindful. I always say to people, don't talk about your holidays. I hate it around holiday time when people say, Oh, my holidays are over. Especially when, you know, a parent who perhaps works at Coles and gets four weeks a year. Like we all know we work during our holidays, but just, you have to be really mindful of what you say, in the community. You've also got to be really mindful because you don't know who knows who.

Carly Boreland:

And who over-hears what I imagine.

Cath Jeffrey:

Exactly. Exactly. And, you know, you could be sitting there, you know, whingeing about Johnny period four and not realise that Johnny's Mum's there, or Johnny's cousin. So it's just a little bit about, common sense and, and thinking.

Carly Boreland:

Some of my fondest times as a teacher were living in Wollongong where we were really involved with the local tennis club and we would go to trivia through the week and play in a mixed competition and things like that. But you know, you're sitting side by side with parents, uncles, aunties, friends of the students who are in your classroom. And that can be great advertising for you, as long as you just remember that and be really mindful of what you're saying.



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Cath Jeffrey:

Definitely, it's a skill and you learn, unfortunately you do learn by experience. I have learned by experience.

Carly Boreland:

And, that's, that's life in general, but it's certainly the life of a teacher. I don't think anyone can claim that they did it all well, at least not the first time.

Cath Jeffrey:

And that it's your, it's your mindset. You've just got to have that mindset where you need to be open.

ANNOUNCEMENT

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Cath Jeffrey:

If you're looking at what we have come through with COVID, I think we have been given an opportunity, especially in a rural and remote setting, to explore new ways to access opportunities for our students. I think that before we all put it in the too hard basket, but I also find that it's, it's a bit, I don't know what the right word is, but I'm finding that even universities and a lot of other people have actually got on board as well. So, it's working both ways, which is fantastic. And yeah, it's up to us too, to have spent a bit of time researching and find out what things are open to our students and how, like the example of the arts unit, having the Aboriginal dance ensemble, when they used to do that, you had to travel to the auditions. And then as I said, go to Sydney, but now that they're running that virtually, it's just going to extend that opportunity to so many more students.

Carly Boreland:

It strikes me that once you're working in a rural setting, you become an advocate for the students and the services that they need in that town as well. How important would you say things like good internet access are these days for students in New South Wales?

Cath Jeffrey:

Oh, it's phenomenal. And especially, I think it's even more so because we rely on that, we rely on internet to access opportunities. We can't just jump in the car and, you know, go to the National Library and have a look at that exhibition. So we're lucky we've just got NBN here, but that is so important to ensure that we have access to services, reliable internet, reliable phone, not only that, if you're looking at your health and medical, in terms of being able to access that, that's a really big thing. So, if you look in a town like in Inverell, if yourself or a family member has cancer, you can't be treated here. And that often splits a lot of families. So, you'll have, you know, Mum, we had a family, where the little boy was sick. So, it meant that him and his Mum had to go to Brisbane, whereas Dad and the other student, other kids stayed here. So that's, yeah. It's really important that you can have access to all facilities.



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Carly Boreland:

And that's something that is a little bit beyond the scope of a teacher to arrange, but it's, but it's absolutely essential, the school can't be the only service that exists in a town

Cath Jeffrey:

And I think that's when you talk about advocacy and that's where you empower your students and go, okay, this guys, this is the issue that you're saying, let's write to our local member, let's do something, it's another life skill that you teach them. You know, if they want change, we work together. But again, another skill.

Carly Boreland:

Cath, we started talking about you in Dubbo and your travels around New South Wales and in your lifetime, you've found that Inverell is your home. And through that, your work as a teacher has connected you to the community that you've lived in. And you describe the relationships you've been able to build as, as lifelong friendships there. And you talked about how time in a country school gives you a respect and a sense of value in the community as, as a really important member of that community, who can be invested not only in your school, but in the history and the success of the town as well. But we talked about how it's not all easy and it's not all straightforward, and you need to be smart if you want to have a successful time in a country school. You talked about being proactive and establishing boundaries early on in your career, being open to ways that you might not get it right with the community all the time and how important it is to understand the families and the people in your town. And to constantly try to build those relationships by showing an interest in them and advocating on their behalf and helping them to be advocates as well, and working together. You talked about really smart ways that you can use technology creatively to improve yourself professionally, but also to create opportunities for students and, and all the way through, I think you're talking about how the benefits to you come from the benefits to your students and looking for opportunities to teach them life skills, be it organising an excursion, or trying to make something better in their town so that they can feel like they can have success wherever they want to go. And hopefully, where they might also want to stay in those good towns that we have all over Australia. Oh Cath, it sounds like Inverell is so lucky to have you.

Cath Jeffrey:

Oh, I don't know about that, I think I'm very lucky to have been in this community. And as I said to be a Mum as well, the childhood that my children had was a good one.

Carly Boreland:

Thanks for sharing your insights into a life well lived in rural New South Wales.

I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the Assistant Director of the CPL. I've been talking with Cathy Jeffrey about teaching in New South Wales public schools in rural settings and to find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you can visit cpl.ans.au/podcasts



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CONCLUSION:

You've been listening to the CPL podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland. And I've been speaking with Jim Sturgiss and Gavin Parker about using statistics in analysis of evidence, and to find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you can visit cpl.ans.au/podcasts

Catherine Jeffrey is the Head Teacher of Teaching and Learning at Inverell High School. She established Aboriginal Studies in year 9 in 2007, it is now one of the most popular subjects in years 9 to 12. Catherine also works with the NSW Department of Education Curriculum Innovations team and the Australian Human Rights Commission developing teaching resources for Stage 5 and 6 Aboriginal Studies and Stage 3,4,5 and 6 History.