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## CPL Podcast: Low-SES Communities: Remote Possibilities Special Part II

**Host:** Carly Boreland

**With:** Jowen Hillyer

**Carly Boreland:** Welcome to the CPL podcast for the Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland. I'm the Assistant Director of the CPL. Today, I'm talking with Jowen Hillyer, and this is the second in a two-part series where we're talking about the different settings that people might find themselves in during this coronavirus situation in New South Wales and how they can make the most of that, where they are to advantage their students, and to also make sure that their life is manageable as well. Today, in this episode, we want to talk about low SES settings and the real, the very real challenges that teachers and communities are finding themselves in right now. Jowen, can you tell us a little bit about your experiences with such communities and what you think might be possible during this time?

**Jowen Hillyer:** I've spent quite a bit of time working in low SES schools in both country areas and in metro, metropolitan areas. So, I began my career at Airids High School in Southwest Sydney at the time was deemed a disadvantaged school under the disadvantaged schools' program. So a very low SES school as well, and also at Taree High School for the last 10 years as a head teacher of English there so, and this Taree High School is a connected community school as well. So under the banner of the connected community strategy. So again, a rural/regional low SES school, every community will be very unique. That's the first thing to recognise when we're talking about any sort of low SES communities and I think that we need to check our assumptions at the door a little bit too, when this first happened last year, we were all under the impression that, oh, well, they, you know, a lot of our kids, they're just not going to be able to, they don't have internet, they don't have this and that.

When we surveyed them that wasn't the issue, the issue was often, something entirely different. It was more about the structure of the school day, about the amount of technology that they had in the place and how many children and how many people were in the house. So, we surveyed our students before we knew that we were going to be going to online learning, to see what they actually needed. I think that that's one of the very first things that any low SES school needs to do is to check our assumptions because we really think that, oh, it's, this is the issue, when really it might not be. So first we thought it was about connectivity and that was absolutely an issue for some of our students. So we needed to provide dongles and loan out laptops and all of those things.

But often it's the structure that schools provided that we found was the issue and our parents are absolutely amazing. Every parent wants the best for their child, but when there are competing elements, there's work, you've got younger siblings, you've got all of these people who want to, need to use the device for different things. It can't work in the same way that a dedicated digital school can. It can't



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work in the same way, even that we would imagine that it would, that we'd be having these nice little Zoom lessons with our year 12, or it doesn't work that way. So probably what I really learned from that situation is that asynchronous learning definitely works the best with check-in time points so that we can spread out the digital love and the devices that are in the home, because even in my own household run of the mill middle-class family with three kids in this house, I would not have been able to do that if they had have all had to connect from home, because we would have only had, you know, the devices that were used in the home. Do you know what I mean? So it was one of those things that I think, look, you know, we need to be really careful of what we assume. I liked the idea afterwards that this sort of hybrid model that we sort of developed where it was these regular check-ins with the teacher, and they logged on if they could during that lesson and they also had, you know, almost like a completion of work table or a, you know, marking themselves when they were present so that we could see that they were doing the mandatory hours, that they were doing all of the right thing, but not expecting, "the dream", I guess, of all of your 30 kids all logging in at the same time. So I think that was really important "first thing".

**Carly Boreland:** And that kind of sounds like the old, book box kind of tasks, you know, you can have them in any subject where it's like, here's the list of things that you can get done. And here's a plan for when and show me when you're finished and ask me if you need help.

**Jowen Hillyer:** Absolutely. And I think, for senior students, I mean, you can ask me any other questions you'd like Carly, or I'll just ramble on, but no, but those, hybrid sorts of ideas really made us focus a little bit more heavily again on the formative assessment, but also on sort of flipped learning sorts of models. So, you're looking at being able to create this, small videos, I do small instructional videos at the beginning of every lesson. Then I would have the work for them to do and then I would have some sort of feedback cycle and then, a meeting with the whole class, it would be scheduled if they wanted to drop in and ask those sorts of questions. Whereby though the teachers were, they were always online during their scheduled classes so that students would know that they could also contact them at a set time on their timetable. As we returned to those sorts of physical spaces, a lot of those things came with us and I think that it was a bit of a ramp up to our pedagogy of making us think about the way that we do things. So I really enjoyed the challenge of it. We did also have to print, you know, all of our work in hard copy. We sent those out as well at the same time. So kids have lots of different ways of accessing the material.

**Carly Boreland:** Can I ask you about how you support both students and colleagues at home with those things like making, checking in on everybody because of course not everyone can be there from the same time every day. How do you make sure that people don't get lost, especially students, but also our colleagues as well?



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**Jowen Hillyer:** Students: that is a difficult one, that is actually a big challenge trying to keep track of students, making sure that people were there, making sure they were connecting and that we could see them because it was a very easy environment, I think for students to just not connect and be able to disappear. It's something that I think we are still working on really truly in schools that making sure that we can do that sort of connection. Schools are doing an amazing job. Public education system is gold standard. It really is and I've seen at schools with students who are really, really struggling, still having SLSO's calling every day making sure that they were making some contact. We would have a, I'd have a running, like I said, a roll call or something that was going in the background that kids can just tick off when they're there. So I can see when they're present. So I'm always on the computer cause I'm still teaching other classes. I can still go in and see who's there. I would put a notice in our Google classroom or our Team. How's everyone feeling today what's going on? I would do anonymous polls as well. So I could just check in and some children then I learned that mistake, I guess, in some ways with year 12 of making it totally anonymous at one point and someone did unload and say, look, I am really struggling with this model. I don't understand this. And I didn't know who it was. So then it was, so that was something I learned pretty early saying, okay, look, I don't know who this was, but can you please get in touch with me? And they did, of course, because it was something that was, work-related not, anything else, but with colleagues as a head teacher, I would be texting them twice a day and phoning them once a day and now that we all working in Teams. Okay. So you can find any of them. Okay. I would say in a five-minute check-in how are you feeling what's going on? I sent care packages to all of my year 12's. I sent the same things to colleagues along the way, old little letters of encouragement. We were still working hybridlike, so a couple of days in at school. So we'd have timetables where it would mean that you'd have a mentor person with you all the time and that I would be there as a head teacher on certain days and that they were free to come and see me at that time too. So the school did organise an amazing timetable that way when no one was left by themselves in the staff room and that everyone was checking in on each other, you know, in a bit of a Round Robin sort of fashion as well. So, a lot of those sorts of supports need to come, not before the student supports, but they need to be working alongside them or otherwise staff feel very much isolated and that they're just working in a, in a bit of, an echo chamber, sometimes dealing with a handful of your eight kids who are not coming to class, they feel by themselves. So it's really, really important to, to do that and to have your same faculty meetings and your same Executive meetings and to keep all of the normal contacts now and with your people going the whole way through.

**Carly Boreland:** Yeah. And it sounds like the, the role of leadership is equally important in these online situations and, and setting up expectations of, of staff and students and maintaining routines that are predictable and reliable.

**Jowen Hillyer:** And I think that that was one of the hardest things actually was, making expectations



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clear. And I think that this is something that I've taken from all of my, any of my online experiences, that it really taught me that when you think you're being very, very clear, you might not be and that idea that clear is kind and unclear is unkind. It's, you really need to keep that at the front of your mind, because you're thinking that you're very clearly communicating to your staff, that this is what has to happen and then someone will say "I didn't know that had to happen", "You didn't tell me that way", anything didn't I say it the right way. And you've got to be really careful that it's very explicit, so it can come across sometimes as being a little bit cold and corporate. So that's what it needs to be really balanced with the relational things of still making those phone calls and checking in, but that everything that's written as what you need to do really needs to be really, really clear, really dot pointed really explained because that's what people will refer back to. They won't remember the 10-minute conversation that you had with them two weeks ago about what they need to do in Teams to be accountable, but they will remember it if it's really clearly explicitly laid out. We did also have a running document where the staff kept their daybooks as Google docs. and it was shared with me every day so I could see what had happened. If there were any concerns, anything that they needed as well. It was multifaceted making sure that they were constantly, feeling connected and supported. I think it's very, very important, those regular check-ins.

**Carly Boreland:** I think that's a lesson I've learned from head teacher time and now working in an online environment, don't assume anyone ever reads or listens to anything that you say ever?

**Jowen Hillyer:** No, because you can imagine, especially if you are working in a digital environment and all you're hearing all day, someone talking to you on Teams or some email coming in or whatever, that's all your life is now. So it's almost like it's so samey that it just goes into the big, you know, mix of other things that you've already heard that day. So it needs to be really clear. It needs to be something that can be printed out and referred to. What do I have to do this week? I think another good idea that I would have taken out of that was to... probably a little bit laborious I guess, for head teachers and it might feel like you're being patronising in some ways, but most teachers feedback was that they loved having a list of *here's what has to be done this week. Here's what's coming up* - like the daily notices almost, but for your faculty. Remember put in anything that you need copied for the exams now, because that's due in two weeks, like almost to that explicit level, and it feels like micromanaging, but when you're in an online environment, you don't have the hallway conversations. So you don't have that thing where you walk down the hallway and go, oh, what does that thing do again? Or our reports next week? Hang on a minute. None of that is there, none of the hallway conversations happen, none of the staffroom chatter happens. That's why you need to be really explicit. We almost micro-managing lists, I guess, so that people can print them and tick it off as they go.

**Carly Boreland:** So Jowen, and when we're talking about low SES settings and communities that are really in need in all kinds of different ways, and they're always the same communities who are overly



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affected by the current health crisis and by all kinds of other social situations. So the impact is terrific. What we need to keep reminding ourselves on, in online is to relook at our own assumptions about our school community and make sure that we really know our people and know what it is that they need and that the way that we know is by asking and finding out.

**Jowen Hillyer:** Look, absolutely. That's something Carly, I have to say that that was one of the most eye-opening things that you think, you know, your community, all of I was in that school for 10 years. So you think you really know your community, oh, you know, our kids might not have that, or they can't do this. Don't assume these things, communities change, demographics change, and your community will try and sometimes quite quickly as well. What they need to be is to be asked what they need not told what they need and so that's where that community partnership is incredibly important in all aspects but particularly when it's a very new and frightening environment like online learning.

**Carly Boreland:** Once we know those things and we're setting up to try to meet those needs to be aware that they, they might not be able to all be together online at the same time, but they might still be very committed to doing the very best and that our expectations should be high for parents and students - that they want to do well and our challenge is to find out how to make that work for them. Along the way to keep preserving those regular routines for staff and for students as well, and to make sure that everyone knows what's expected and that they can find that information clearly so that they can feel confident in themselves that they're doing a good job.

**Jowen Hillyer:** I think that that's, very important what you were saying there to remember that everyone is doing their best. You need to, to assume that they are, that our students are, that our parents want the best that all of these parents, the parents care about their children and they want the very best, but again, we need to figure out how to do that for, you know, with them, not for them or to them. I think that that's probably one of the biggest things that you can take away from that experience, but yes definitely they are really hardworking communities and there are people who, you know, want to have a high expectation, and want to have an excellent education. They just need to be shown how they can do that in this new space and everyone's navigating it. So I think everyone is not be so hard on themselves for a start and realise that we're all actually learning something new and it's very challenging for everybody.

**Carly Boreland:** You've been listening to the CPL podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland, the Assistant Director of the CPL. I've been speaking with Jowen Hillyer about her experiences in low SES settings and what you can do for students during the remote teaching experience that we're having in New South Wales at the moment and to find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you can visit our website at [cpl.asn.au/podcasts](http://cpl.asn.au/podcasts)



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*Jowen Hillyer* is currently Head Teacher of English, HSIE and languages at Aurora College, the Department of Education's first selective virtual school for rural and remote students (7-10) and remote students in Stage 6.

Jowen has been a teacher, head teacher and teacher educator for 25 years, with experience in both rural and disadvantaged public schools, as well as 3 years as an Associate Lecturer at The University of Sydney.

In her current role Jowen leads a large, diverse faculty situated all over the state in new approaches, innovation, and student engagement. Her research interests are centred on project-based learning, boy's writing in the middle years and mentoring programs for beginning English teachers.