

# Special Education Teacher Support Needs

Insights from the Australian Context

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Supervised by Associate Professor Hoa Nguyen,  
University of New South Wales

# Acknowledgement of Country

*“I’d like to begin by acknowledging the **Gadigal people of the Eora Nation** as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today, here at ICC Sydney. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples joining us today.”*

# My Background

- 15 years in behaviour support
- Early years as in-home and in-classroom support
- Undergrad in psych and linguistics
- Masters in Special Education
- A pre-covid stint in a specialist autism school in London
- Early intervention
- Most recently
- 3.5 years in a specialist autism school in Sydney
- Pursuit of educational research.
- This presentation: Thesis at UNSW

# Today's Topic

## Aims

- Demonstrate the systemic nature of Special Education Teachers environments
- Spark discussion about how systemic challenges can be addressed
  - Through systemic change (long term)
  - Directly in schools (short term)

# Some Definitions

- **Leadership (*loose definition*)**
  - Anyone in a senior role to a special education teacher
  - Principles, early and middle leadership, policymakers, departments
- **Special Education Teacher (SET)**
  - On Class
  - Off Class (LAST, special education leadership, support coordinators)
- **Support (*loose definition*)**
  - Anything that makes you capable of doing your job
  - Formal and informal supports
  - Training/skills
  - Emotional support
  - Physical environments
  - Departmental resources/ funding and support staff
- **Department “their department”**
  - The body the drives policy and resource for that individual/school
  - CSO, State Dep Ed, Independent school administration

# Why SETs Matter

Special Education Teachers are uniquely positioned in the system to provide vital support to all students and teachers.

- **Students**
  - 25.7% of students (ACARA 2024)
  - Ongoing classroom challenges can impact everyone's opportunities to learn
- **Teachers**
  - Australia's teacher shortage
  - Major reported challenges;
    - Behaviour Management
    - Curriculum Adjustment
    - Workload

# Background

How can we represent SETs in policy and practice if we don't have a good, wholistic understanding of their needs?

## Underrepresentation in **Research**

### Australian Research

- Lack of visibility across research
- SET Specific
  - 3 publications in 10 years
    - Holzner & Gaunt, 2023*
    - Lemon & Turner, 2024*
    - Rendoth et al., 2024*
- All Education
  - Included but not recognized as different population in large data sets
  - Suggestion: their needs (if different) not significant amongst the majority

# Research Questions



1. How are Australian SETs currently supported?



2. What supports may be required by Australian SETs?

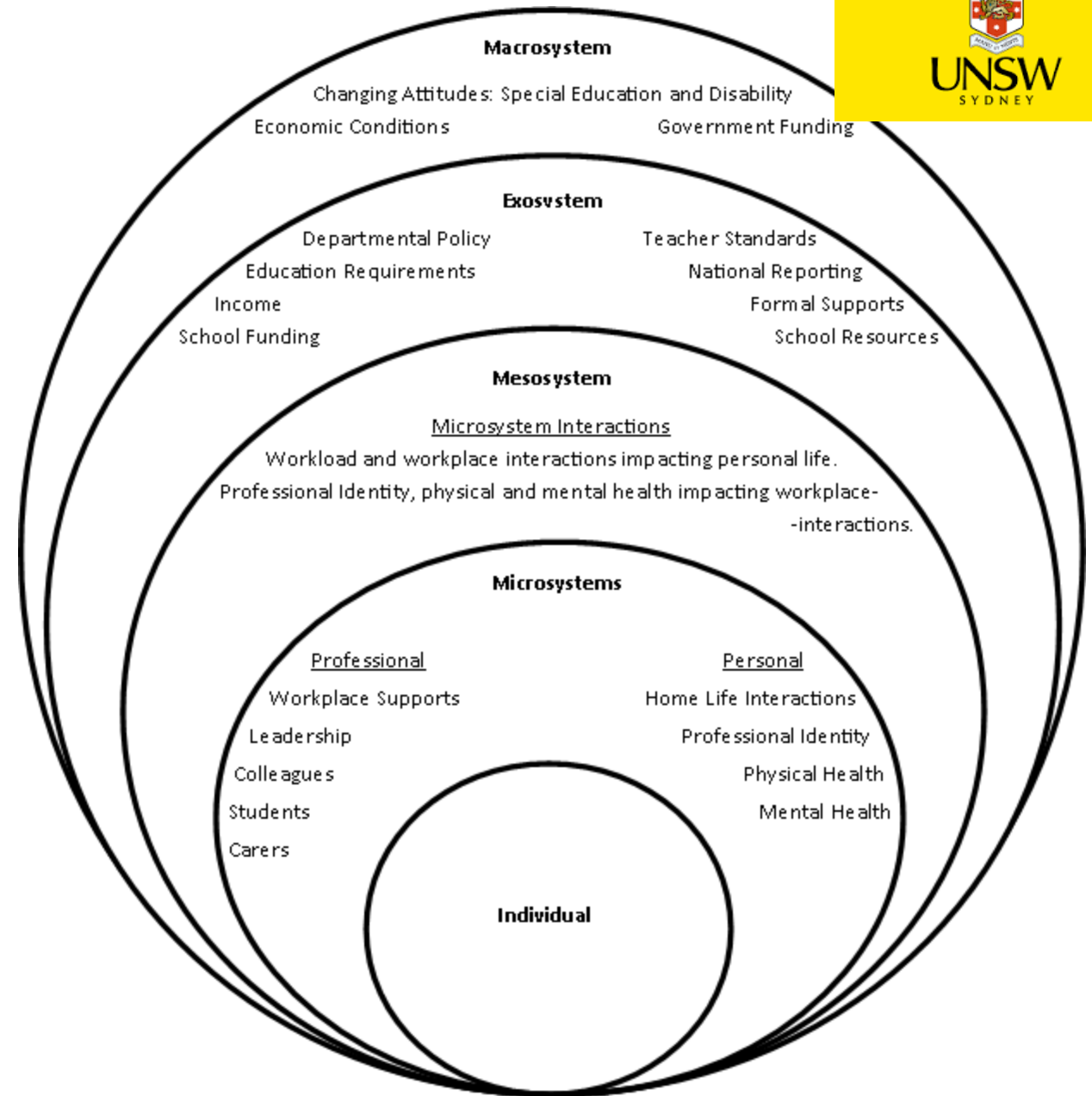


3. What contributes to Australian SET intent to leave?



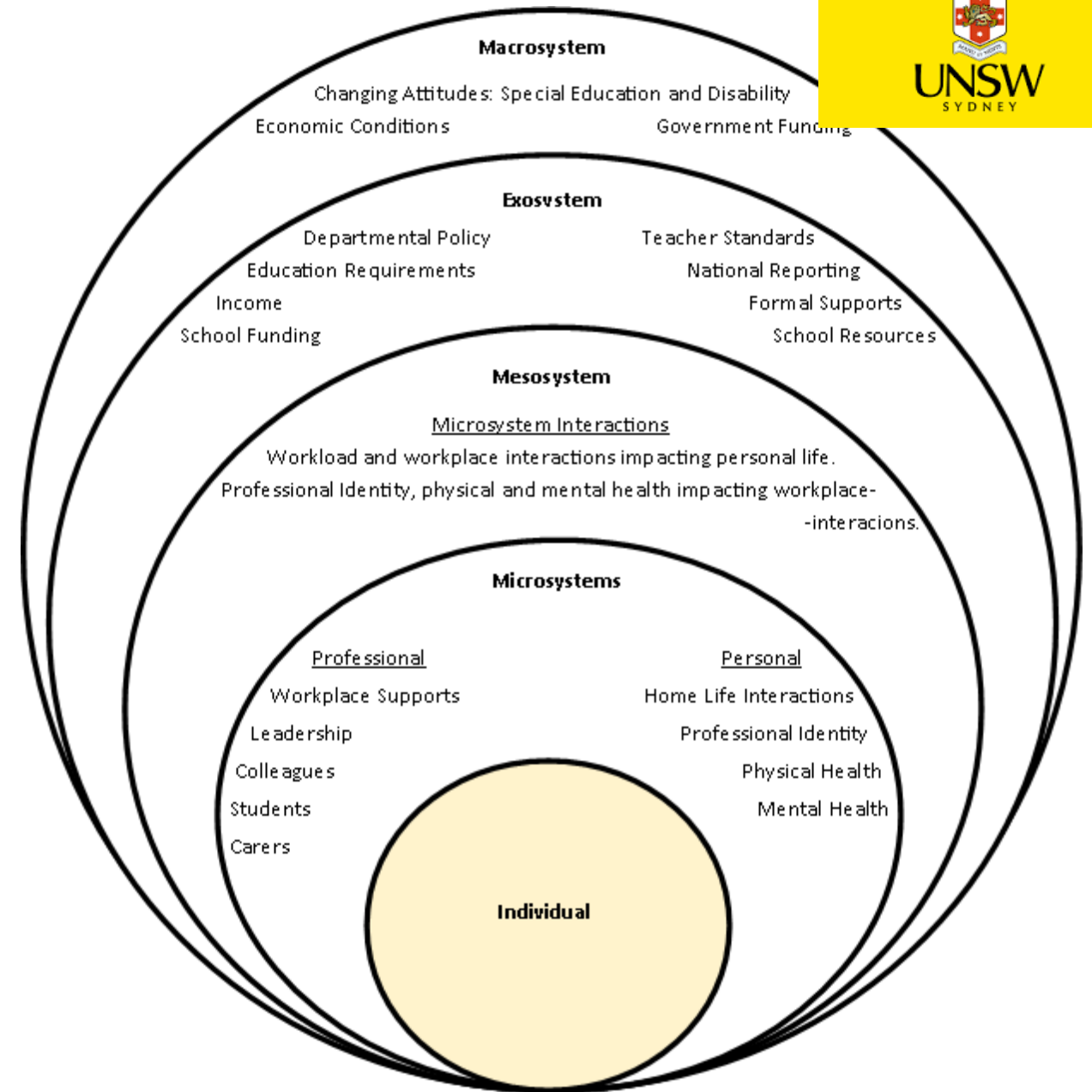
# Approach/Framework

- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Crawford, 2020)
- Humans develop and behave in response to their environments
- *A good lens for approaching support needs from a wholistic view.*



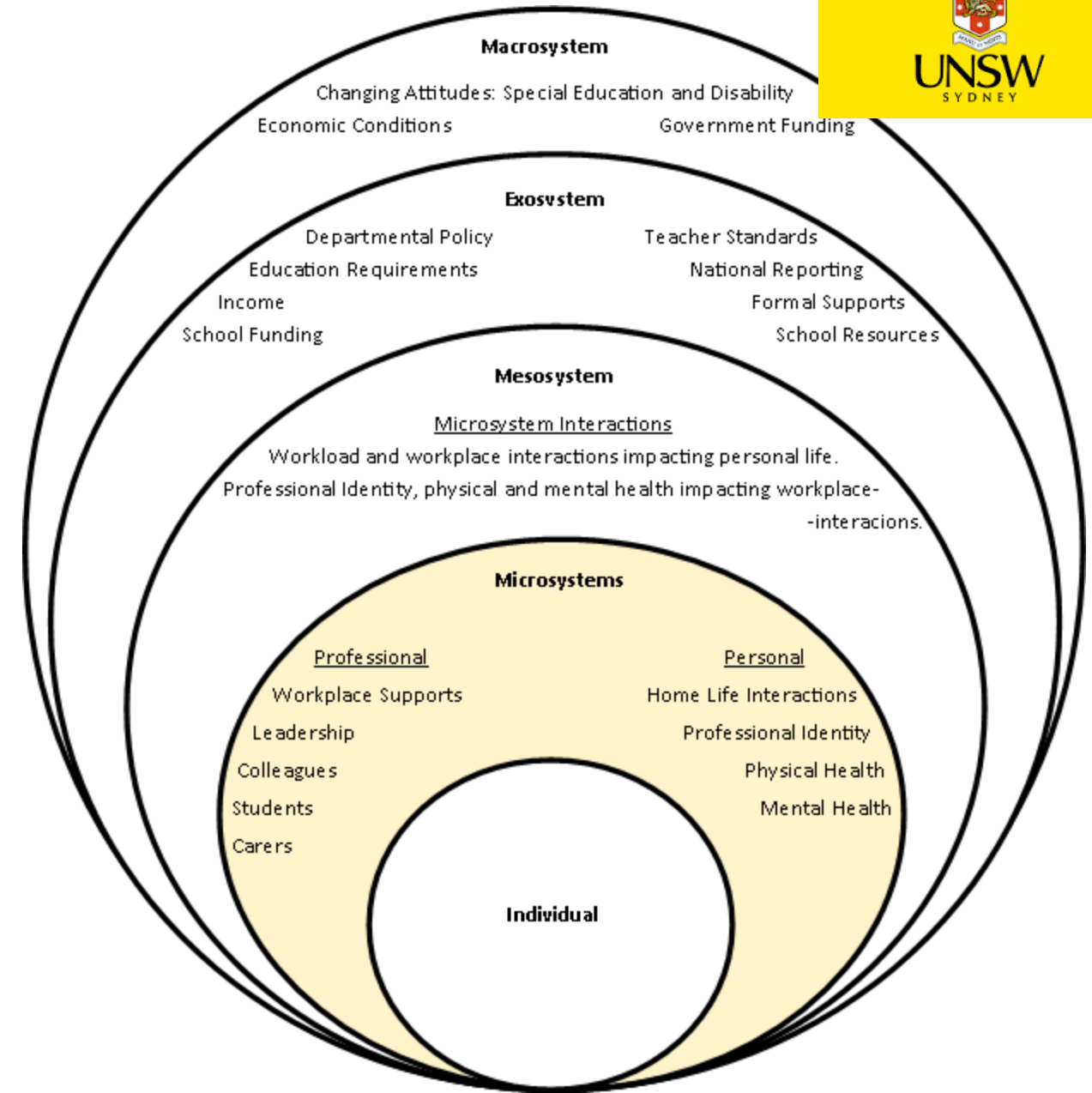
# Approach/Framework

- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Crawford, 2020)
- **Individual:** Thoughts, feelings, history of learning (training, experience), physical and mental health



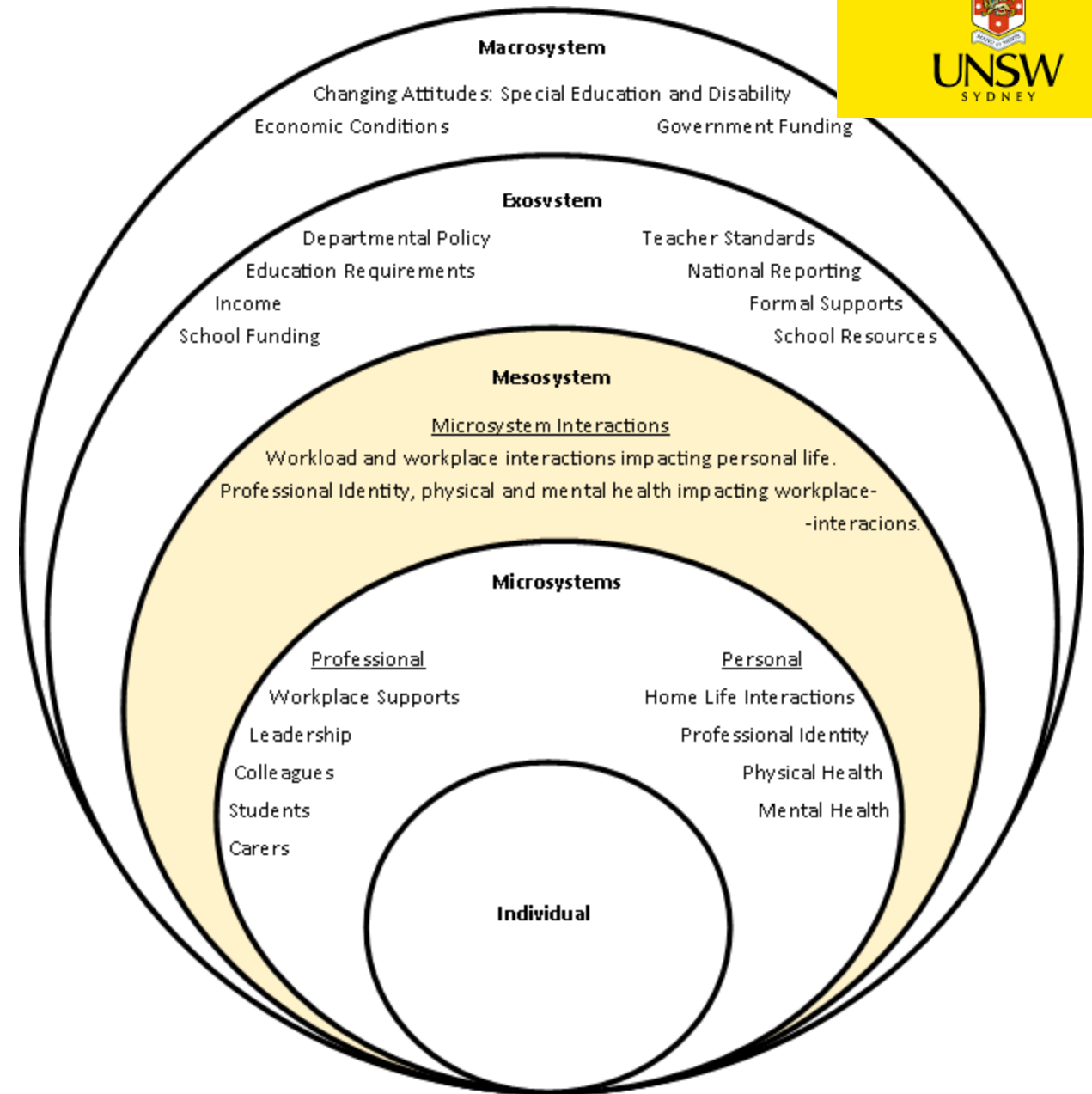
# Approach/Framework

- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Crawford, 2020)
- **Microsystems:** direct daily environments and interactions
- Personal (Family, social life, sports)
- Professional



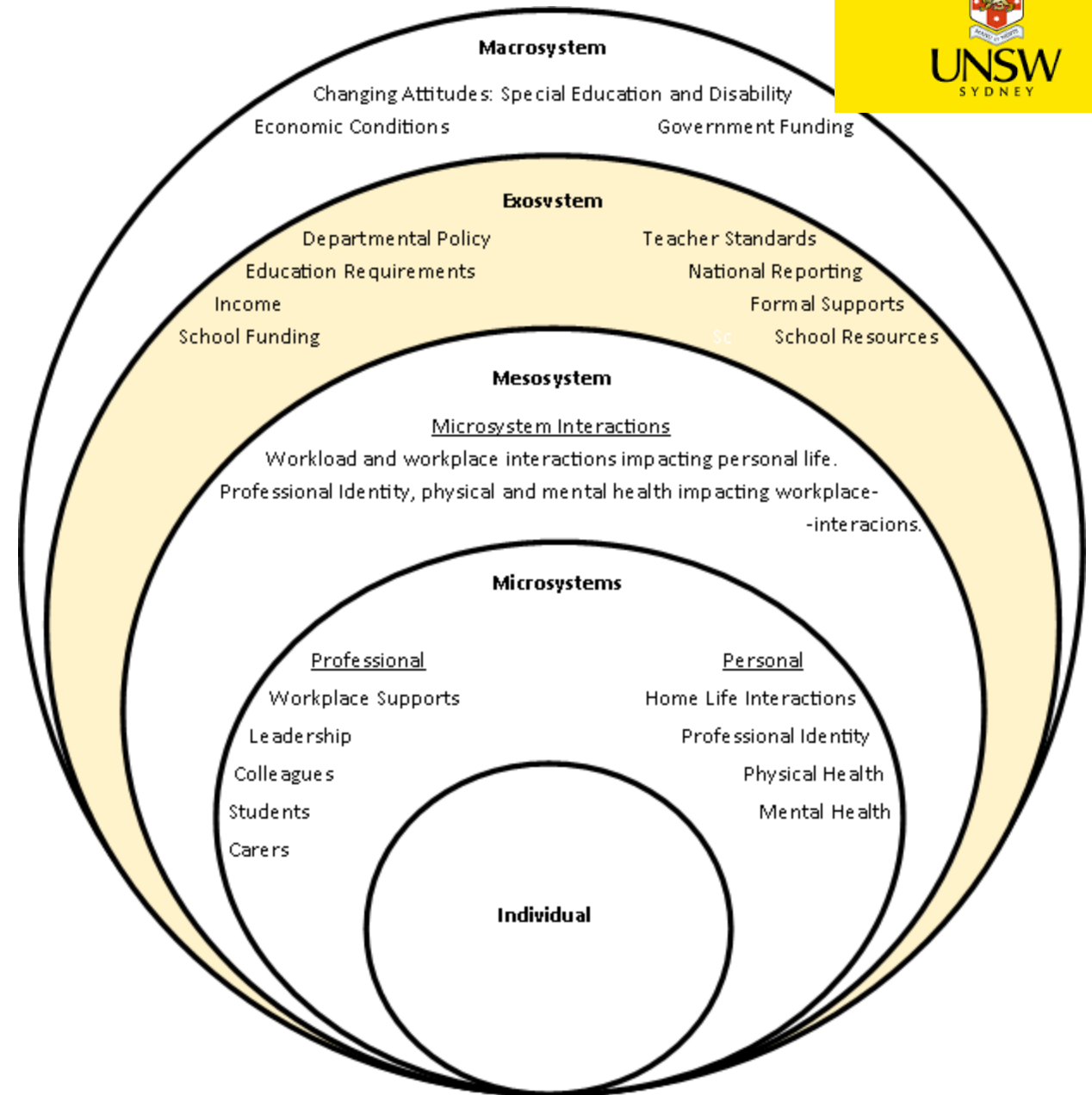
# Approach/Framework

- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Crawford, 2020)
- **Mesosystem:** Interactions of microsystems
- Impact of professional life on personal life and vice versa



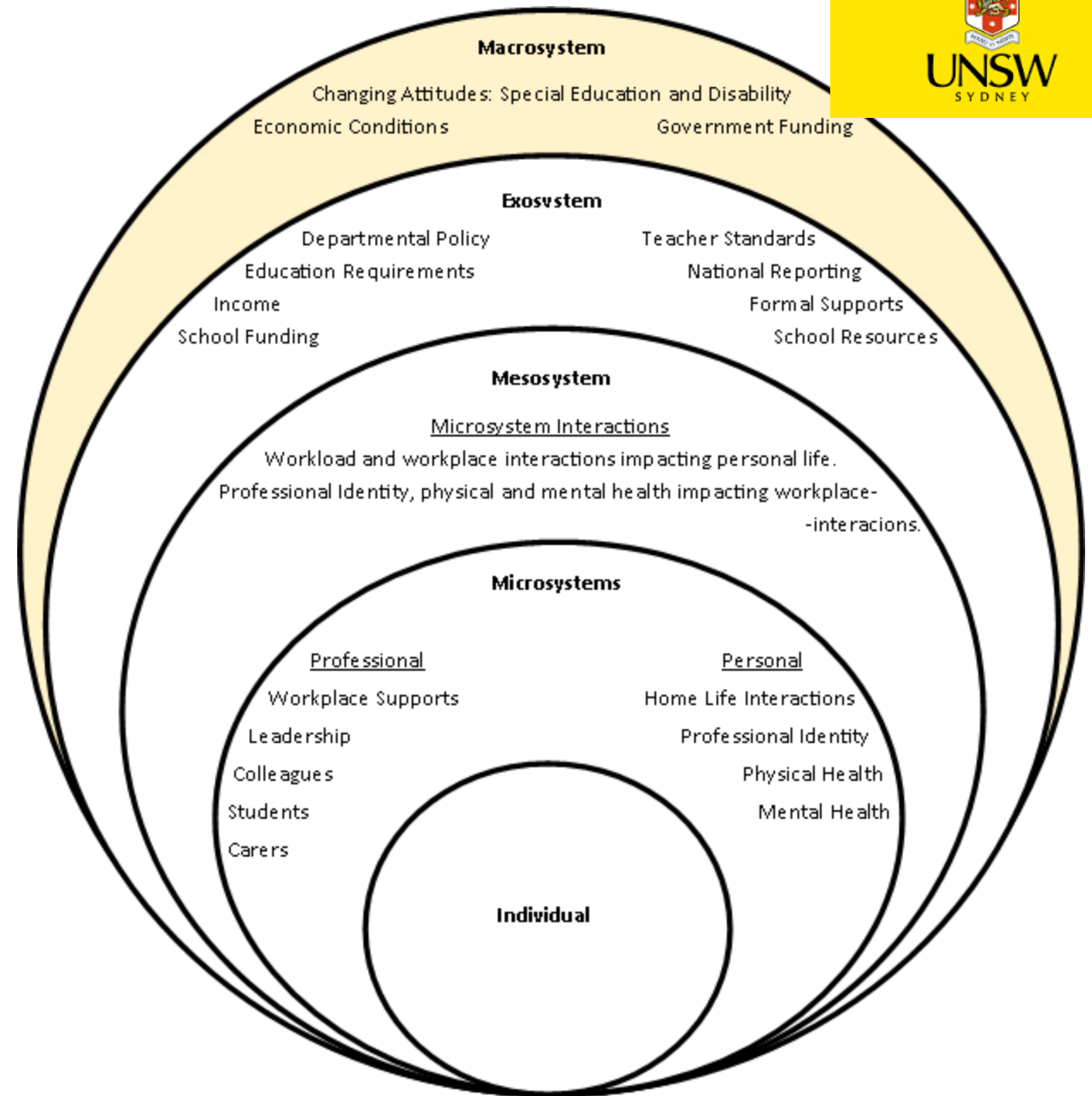
# Approach/Framework

- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Crawford, 2020)
- **Exosystem:** When a system you (generally) don't directly interact with impacts one you do
- Example: Policy/agreements dictating
  - Income
  - Leave entitlements
  - In class support personnel



# Approach/Framework

- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Crawford, 2020)
- **Macrosystem:** Indirectly impacts everything.
- Example: attitudes of society dictating how we approach treating our students (person first or identity first language in across disability community)



# Method

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**Qualitative Study:** 12 participants

## **Open ended interviews**

- All participants were asked the same set of basic questions.
- Aim: to find common links across a variety of subjective experiences (thematic development)

# Participants (*pseudonyms*)

	Name	On class	Leadership	Full/part-time	State	Location	SPED Degree	Attained prior	Years as Teacher	Years as SET	Always planned to be SET
Mix of Public Catholic Independent	Amanda	Yes	No	Full	Vic	City	No	No	0-5	0-5	No
	Kelly	Yes	No	Full	NSW	Rural	Yes	No	5-10	5-10	Yes
	Natalie	No	No	Full	NSW	Rural	No	No	10-15	10-15	Yes
	Megan	Partial	Yes	Full	NSW	City	Yes	No	10-15	10-15	No
	Jennifer	Yes	Yes	Full	NSW	Regional	Yes	No	10-15	10-15	Yes
	Michelle	No	Yes	Full	NSW	Rural	Yes	No	15-20	5-10	No
Mix of Mainstream Support Segregated Schools	Amy	Yes	No	Part	NSW	City	No	No	15-20	0-5	No
	Kate	Yes	Yes	Full	NSW	City	Yes	No	20+	10+	No
	Emma	No	No	Casual	NSW	City	No	No	20+	10-15	No
	Melissa	No	No	Full	NSW	Rural	No	No	20+	0-5	No
	Renee	Yes	No	Full	NSW	City	Yes	Yes	20+	20+	Yes
	Linda	Yes	Yes	Full	NSW	Rural	Yes	Yes	20+	0-5	No
		<b>7 on class</b>	<b>5 leadership</b>	<b>9FT</b>	<b>11NSW</b>	<b>Mix</b>	<b>SPED Degree 7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Mix</b>	<b>Mix</b>	<b>4</b>



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# Outcome:

SET challenges reflect cumulative pressure across the ecological systems

- Primary themes

- Workload and Sustainability
- Professional Skills
- Physical and Psychological Safety at Work

*The next slides are designed to demonstrate the compounding challenges, don't get caught up in the amount of text. We will discuss the important bits and you will have access to copies of the slides.*



# Outcome: Workload and Sustainability

## Macrosystem: Push for Full Inclusion

- School environments not being ready- **Pencils and cricket bats as weapons**
- Plans tick boxes and get filed away- Wider staff lacking skills and resources to implement plans

## Exosystem: Formal Supports hard to access and did not meet need (*Support X Practice Gap*)

- Accessing departmental funding
- Case management/Informally filling gaps
- **Student welfare: SET students 2-3x more likely to have reportable welfare concerns (Maclean, 2017)**
- Vague role and responsibility statements

## Mesosystem: Interactions with school staff Misunderstanding of SET role within schools.

***“no one, not even my leadership understands what a special ed teacher does.”***

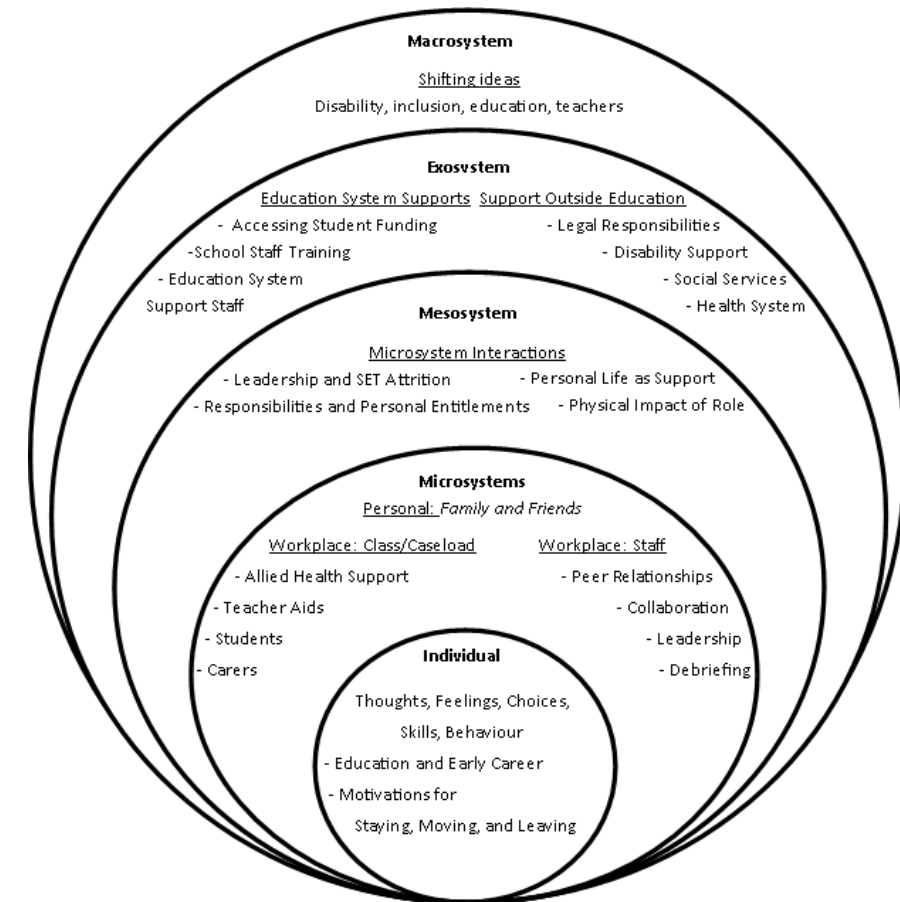
- Challenging colleague and leadership interactions
- Feeling Irreplaceable
- Missing mandated breaks and planning time

## Microsystems

- Large workloads bleeding into family time causing strain on personal life

***“I can’t keep doing this for the sake of my family”***

Undercurrent Values: ***“It doesn’t matter because the kids come first”***



# Outcome: Skills of SETs, their supports, and their peers

**Macrosystem:** *“No one understands what a special education teacher does”* Societal undervalue of SET expertise (not treated like experts, anyone with teacher registration can be an SET)

- Push for Inclusion: School Staff capacity to support all students
- “We need to teach these teachers how to support these kids”*

## Exosystem:

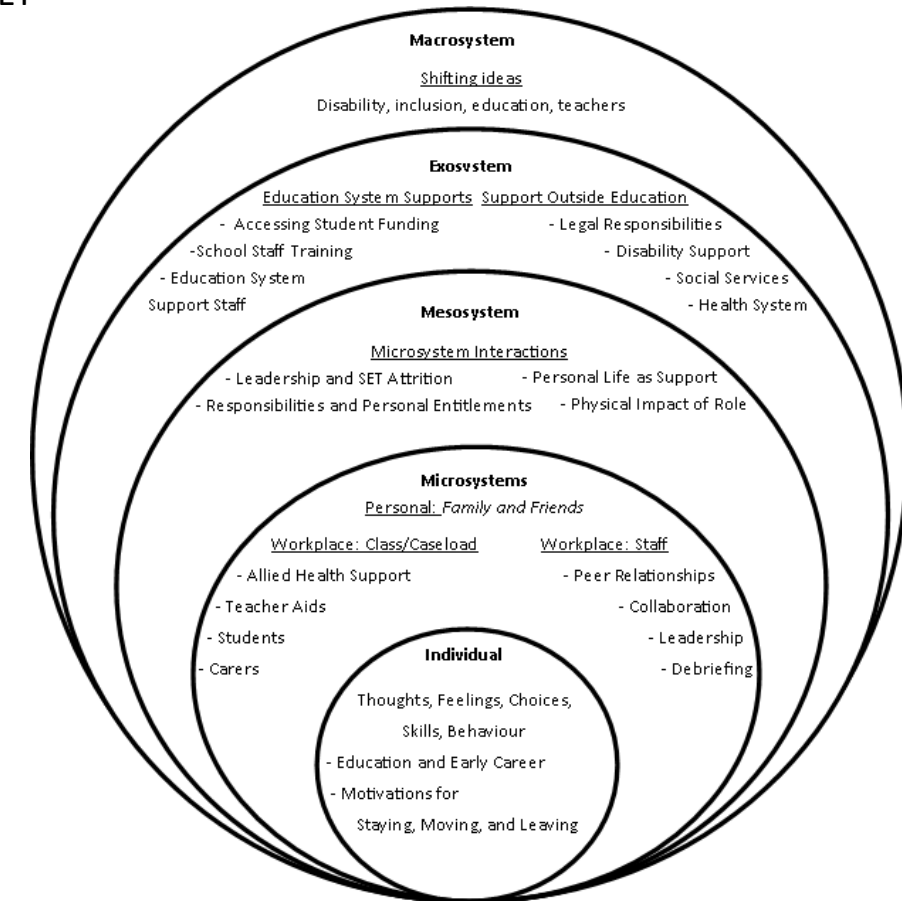
- Resource X Practice gap: Lots of optional PD but lacking minimum requirements
- Supports X Practice gap: support staff lack minimum training requirements

**Mesosystem:** Specialist Training impact on early SET experiences

- SETs **with** specialist training thrived while those **without** experienced ‘steep learning curve’ across both graduate and veteran teachers. *“learning to be a teacher all over again”*
- Specialist skills being learned ad-hoc
  - Some professional development
  - Lots of discussion about informal training and trial-and-error
- **Leadership integral to SET skill development**
  - Many in leadership roles without SET expertise

## Microsystems

- Training support staff (workload) during crises (safety)
- Identified need for leadership lead debriefing practices (leadership skills)



Undercurrent Value: **“when he jumps into my arms at the beginning of each day, that makes it all worth it”**

# Outcome: Workplace Safety (physical and psychological)

***“We all say to each other, it's not okay to come to school to be hurt...As a special ed teacher, the reality is if you're not prepared for that...then this isn't the job for you”.***

Across the workforce, SETs experience the highest level of work-related assault. (Al Afreed et al., 2022)

**Macrosystem:** Cultural normalisation of harm across special education field.

**Exosystem:** Training standards

- Expressed lack of minimum training standards in behaviour management across industry
  - Proactive skills = minimizing risk of crisis situations
  - Leadership positioned in school to attend to crises
  - Support staff purpose is to proactively and reactively support teacher and classroom

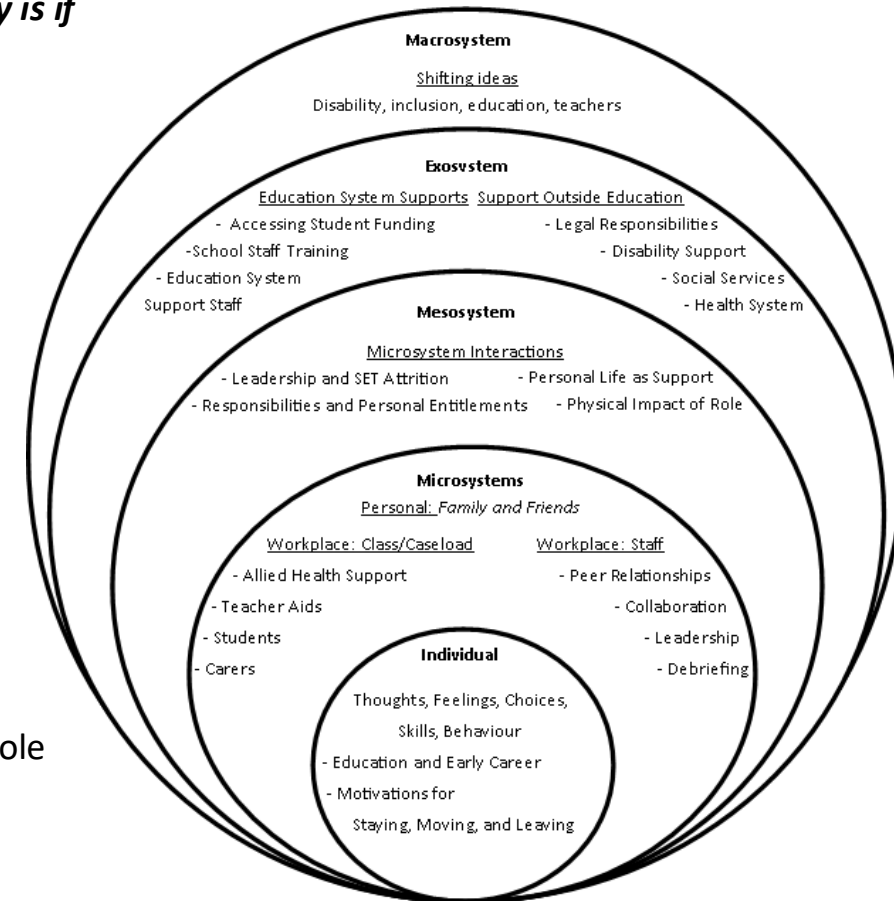
**Mesosystem and Microsystems**

- SETs training support staff
- SETs called during suggested avoidable crises (lack or proactive supports for students)
- Isolation and peer relationship breakdown: moving from long term role in mainstream to SET role within same school described as *“social suicide”*

**Individual:** Frequent preventable injuries. Secondary trauma (Adam Fraser’s research, psych first aide)

- Requests for more proactive and robust debriefing and supportive practices

Undercurrent Value: It doesn’t matter because...***“My kids get a fresh start to be their best every day”***





# Primary Findings and Suggestions

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## **Effective supports primarily situated within daily work interactions**

- leadership facilitated upskilling
- emotional support
- classroom support staff
- peer and allied health collaboration

These supports hinged on the skills and resources of personnel.

When they did not align with SET support needs, these supports quickly became challenges.

## **Suggested Supports**

- Upskilling of leadership, classroom support staff, teachers, and SETs
- Behaviour Management
  - Proactive: Rapport Building
  - Reactive: Crisis Management
- Consistent, proactive, and reactive debriefing practices
- Upskilling teachers in setting clear boundaries and expectations for collaboration
  - Allied Health

# Primary Findings and Suggestions

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## **Student access to essential welfare, medical and disability services impacted SET workloads**

- Case management
- Filling gaps
- Absorbing responsibilities outside scope and formal workload.
- *“vicious cycle of unmet responsibilities”*

## **Suggested Supports**

- Clearly defined, truly specialist roles and responsibilities
- Not just what they can or should do, but also what is outside their scope

# Values

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**Values:** Protective against SET attrition

Strong student-centered values were present across the cohort. These values often trumped the challenges they described.

**Value Congruence:** The amount to which staff values align with leadership and organisations.

## Two outcomes:

1. When SET values were incongruent **with leadership**, SETs moved within the field to seek more supportive leadership and workplaces
2. When SET values were incongruent **with the education system** they expressed intent to leave the profession.

# Values

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**Value Congruence:** The amount to which staff values align with leadership and organisations.

## ***What can be done?***

Choose leadership who have strong student-centered values.

Discuss professional values at work.

Demonstrate how planned changes are related to staff values (*even when that's not the point*)

When you can't make systemic change, how can you compensate for challenges that complements your resources and capacity for sustainability?

# What can leadership do to support SETs within each layer?

## Macrosystem:

**Advocate for realistic inclusion practices and public SET recognition**

**Exosystem:** Department level/Policy  
Simplify admin (funding and supports)

**Protect teaching time- liaison officer (QLD)**

Elevate SET voice in policy

## Mesosystem:

**Define and disseminate SET roles and responsibilities within schools**

Protect personal time and entitlements

## Microsystem:

**Build capacity of staff teams to meet student needs**

Proactive staffing that eliminates overreliance on individuals

Introduce proactive and reactive debriefing practices

Staff wellbeing plans (ready to work)

## Individual:

Ensure training aligns with role complexity

**Embody, celebrate, and highlight the importance and practice of SET values**



# References

- Al Afreed, F. M., Lane, T. J., & Gray, S. E. (2022). Work-related injuries in the Australian education sector: A retrospective cohort study. *Injury*, 53(12), 3962–3969. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.injury.2022.09.046>
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# Future Directions

**More Research:** Building school staff capacity to support all students through professional development on rapport building.

**From this research:** relationships between staff and students matter. Relationship development between both SET and all teachers and their neurodivergent students was considered a specialist skill.

**Practically:** Teacher workload and wellbeing

**Professionally:** Retention and inclusion

- Positive relationships appeal to staff values
- Does this impact attitudes towards inclusion.
- 2026
- Get in touch/Add on LinkedIn if you are interested in hearing about future work and research.



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# Questions?

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Support Practitioner, Research

