Becoming Exceptional: Exploring selves and assemblages in the National Exceptional Teaching in Disadvantaged Schools program

Jo Ailwood
University of Newcastle

Margot Ford

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The University of Newcastle

Abstract: This paper explores the work of 'becoming exceptional' amongst a group of preservice teachers taking part in the National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools program (NETDS). The NETDS program is directed towards mentoring and supporting outstanding preservice teachers to transition into the schools where they can make a significant difference. For us, as teacher educators leading the teaching of our University's NETDS program, the most important questions became ones of self and transformation for the participating preservice teachers. To begin these explorations we make use of concepts provided by Deleuze and Guattari, and expanded upon by Braidotti; the notions of 'becoming' and 'collective assemblages'. These concepts help us explore the work of becoming exceptional within the collective assemblage and space of the NETDS program.

Introduction

This paper explores the work of 'becoming exceptional' amongst a group of preservice teachers taking part in the National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools program (NETDS). The NETDS program is directed towards mentoring and supporting outstanding preservice teachers to transition into low socioeconomic schools where they can make a significant difference. The notion of what constitutes 'exceptional' in teaching is of course highly contested and deserves detailed treatment. Currently, thinking about 'exceptional' focuses upon identifying key characteristics of quality teaching, such as the Australian Teaching Standards (AITSL, 2011), the Quality Teaching Framework in New South Wales (Gore & Bowe, 2015) and the changing nature of the teaching profession (Leaton Gray & Whitty, 2010). Whilst acknowledging it is a problematic term, for the purposes of this paper we are drawing on those indicators of 'exceptionality' used in the NETDS program (Burnett & Lampert, 2014). These will be discussed below. For us, as teacher educators and members of the team leading the teaching of our University's NETDS program, the most important reflection was upon how the idea of 'exceptional' was played out in the transformation of identities for the participating preservice teachers.

In this paper we explore preservice teachers' stories, in doing this we are seeking ways to make spaces that sit with the chaos, risk and excitement of the experiences preservice teachers reported as they 'became exceptional'. Drawing on the concepts of becoming and collective assemblage, first discussed by Deleuze and Guattari and built on by Braidotti, we are exploring the complexity of space inhabited by this group of preservice teachers as they are 'becoming exceptional' in the place of the university. To begin this exploration we first describe the NETDS program at our University, including an outline of the research methodology. This is followed by a brief discussion of theoretical concepts to help frame the

analysis. We have divided the analysis into three sections, these sections reflect key themes raised in the research interviews with preservice teachers. The first considers the preservice teachers' journeys prior to entering into the University's teacher education programs. The next theme then examines the initial reactions of the preservice teachers on being approached to become part of the NETDS program, with the final theme tracking reactions as they became familiar with the notion of exceptionality.

Background to the NETDS Program and the Participating Preservice Teachers

In this particular NETDS program, preservice teachers are selected from primary and early childhood teacher education degree programs. Some of the primary teacher education students are also pursuing a further specialization in special education. Preservice teachers are selected in the first semester of their third year of a four-year degree. They are identified by a Grade Point Average of above 5.75 on a 7-point scale. We also look for a high grade in an Aboriginal education course and a sociology of education course, which are both compulsory in all undergraduate teacher education degree programs at our University. We have access to their first professional experience reports, which are also used to establish the preservice teachers' quality as beginning practitioners. Those who meet these criteria are contacted and invited to apply, through submitting an expression of interest.

There are several ways the preservice teachers are supported within the NETDS program as they continue through their degree. First, they receive targeted information through a tutorial class attached to the third year professional experience course. Alongside the tutorial content that all preservice teachers in the course receive, the NETDS group are also introduced to research on poverty and specific pedagogical frameworks for working with children in low SES schools. An important aspect of the coursework is that NETDS preservice teachers must create integrated units of work as part of the assessment requirements of the professional experience course. As exceptional preservice teachers, we encourage them to build units of work that are cutting edge, contain challenging content, and that are relatable to students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. They are encouraged to trust their own knowledge, be creative and become transformational pedagogues. Alongside this coursework, NETDS preservice teachers also hear from invited speakers in classes, for example principals and newly graduated teachers.

During their participation in the NETDS program, the preservice teachers complete two professional experience placements. For these placements the NETDS group are placed in specific schools with an ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) below 1000 and that have agreed to become focus schools for the NETDS project. We try to ensure there is more than one preservice teacher in a school, and sometimes we can have up to eight in one school site. They are mentored through their final professional experiences by members of the NETDS team, through visiting their school and regular opportunities to share experiences via email and phone. During the school visits preservice teachers in the NETDS program come together to discuss any issues they may be facing. One important aspect of our approach is the establishment of a culture of sharing resources and experiences. One of the ways we do this is via an active social media site that all NETDS preservice teachers across all intakes can join.

The NETDS program referred to in this paper has preservice teachers who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds themselves. This reflects the University intake as a whole, where on average 27% of students are from low SES backgrounds, increasing to 36% in some teacher education programs. For example, out of a total of fifty-two preservice teachers in the NETDS program, twenty-four had incomes lower than $500 per week after tax, with

twenty-one on some type of government benefit. There was a considerable variation in ages with the oldest at fifty-four years and the youngest at nineteen. Forty of the cohort was over the age of twenty-one. This reflects low SES pathways into university of mature age students, many of whom take years after finishing school to decide they can go to university. However, there is evidence that once at university they often outperform their younger peers (Cantwell, Archer & Bourke 2001). Eighteen of the fifty-two NETDS preservice teachers had other careers prior to entering into teacher education programs. Within the older group of preservice teachers, most of whom are women, there are seventeen who are parents, with families ranging from four children to one child. The NETDS group also reflects family complexities in contemporary Australian society with a combination of blended families, students with partners and spouses as well as six who are sole parents (Holmes, Hughes & Julian, 2014).

Of the fifty-two preservice teachers in the NETDS program thus far, twenty-four are first in their family to go to university. Their pathways into the teacher education degree programs were various with eleven entering the teacher education programs via another degree and sixteen through an enabling entrance to university scheme. Twenty-six indicated they had an Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking (ATAR) score, which suggests they completed Year 12 at high school. The ATAR score ranks high school completions on a scale up to 100. Of the NETDS students who had an ATAR, fifteen were between 50 and 79, eight between 80 and 89, and three over 90. Most of the NETDS group attended government schools, with several indicating they went to multiple schools. Thirteen attended the Catholic education system for some or all of their schooling. The majority worked for several years before coming to university in a variety of occupations, mostly casual work in retail or the service industry. Thus, a large proportion of NETDS teacher education students in our program are over the age of twenty-one (61%), and 51% are over the age of twenty-six; 34% have children and 46% have incomes below $500 per week after tax.

Methodology

All NETDS preservice teachers complete an online survey providing background and demographic information. This baseline data complies with information gathered across all of the universities running NETDS programs. The data includes information about their education, entrance pathway to university, age, income, and family background. In our NETDS program, the pre-service teachers are also invited to complete an individual, audio-recorded, semi-structured interview prior to their first NETDS professional experience placement. Forty-eight of the fifty-two NETDS preservice teachers agreed to participate in an individual interview.

The interviews were between 30-60 minutes and were conducted by a combination of the NETDS team and research assistants (Seidman, 2013). Following transcription, the interviews were coded so they could be cross-checked against the quantitative baseline data, and then de-identified. The interviews were semi-structured, following a conversational style within a broad structure (Garbarski, Schaeffer & Dykema, 2016; Brinkman, 2016). They included discussion about the preservice teacher's own educational experiences prior to university; experiences in the workforce prior to university; the reasons for entering into the teacher education degree program and their experiences being chosen for and becoming part of the NETDS program. The transcripts were carefully mined for common themes and responses to the broad structure noted above. Key themes emerging from this reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts included the complex experiences of the preservice

teachers who themselves came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the high proportion of preservice teachers who made mention of their disbelief at being chosen for the program.

In this paper, we are interested in the complex biographies of those NETDS preservice teachers who came to the university via less traditional pathways and who could be considered economically disadvantaged themselves. As such, we have focused on a set of twelve interviews from our overall data set. These are not intended to be representative, but rather best articulate the complexity of the themes that emerged from analysis of the semi-structured interviews.

Collective Assemblages and Becoming Exceptional

To explore the themes that emerged from these interviews, we draw upon Braidotti's (2010) discussion of nomadology, a position influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, along with Foucault. A key point of exploration within the stories told by the preservice teachers is of how they engage in the collective assemblage of the NETDS group, including their wider experience of university attendance. We explore how they weave these transformational experiences through their complex histories; and in doing so are trying to understand how they reflect upon and account for becoming exceptional as preservice teachers.

For Braidotti, 'nomadic subjectivity is the social branch of complexity theory' (2013, p. 87). This is a neat summation of the chaotic subjectivity work that participation in the NETDS seemed to demand from many of the preservice teachers. As they discuss the varied influences of spaces and places of their past, with dominant narratives imposed, sometimes by family and peers and at times by teachers and the broader community, we can glimpse the pre-service teachers' desiring work of becoming a teacher, or in this case, becoming exceptional teachers. In low SES communities, as experienced by some of these preservice teachers, these stories are often of disjuncture and dis-identification in a bid to create counter narratives of educational success and transformative pedagogy. For many of them, making a difference for other children was crucial.

The concept of collective assemblage enables an exploration of how the NETDS preservice teachers may connect within and beyond the group to build connections as they fit together and construct what it means to be a participant in the NETDS program. Assemblage is not random, it is purposeful, and it a labour that is transformative. It is also not permanent; it is fluid, with potentials that both enable and foreclose ways of being. According to Jackson and Mazzei,

> An assemblage isn't a thing – it is the process of making and unmaking the thing. It is the process of arranging, organizing, fitting together. So to see it at work, we have to ask not only how things are connected but also what territory is claimed in that connection (2013, p. 262).

In this paper we are beginning to analyse what this labour of creating and/or dismantling assemblages may mean.This analysis is closely knitted with becoming, as students and selves are shaped and reshaped in the collective assemblages made possible in the physical place of the university, the university classroom and schools that are perceived to be disadvantaged. The collective assemblage in the place of the university, whilst also fitting together becoming exceptional as part of the NETDS program, enables multiple potentials and emergences for the preservice teachers. Within this potential there is an ongoing tension between consistency (territorialisation) and erosion/fragmentation (deterritorialisation) (Nilan & Wibawanto, 2015), as the preservice teachers engage in the process of managing consistent selves whilst also constructing the idea of being and becoming exceptional. It is a thinking through of how 'being exceptional' as a preservice teacher is made thinkable and possible.

Through this approach, we are encountering the question of what being part of the NETDS group is 'doing' to the preservice teachers; exploring how identities and selves are encountering and transforming each other; in other words, we are attending to that Foucaultian question of 'what is happening?' (Jackson, 2013). As Braidotti (2010, p. 411) points out 'transformative projects involve a radical repositioning on the part of the knowing subject, which is neither self-evident, nor free of pain.' The pain and confusion of transformation is occasionally mentioned outright by preservice teachers in our NETDS program, but is also alluded to in more subtle ways as they struggle to position and re-position themselves in relation to the ideas explored, especially those of exceptional teaching and disadvantage.

Importantly, as Braidotti suggests, 'the nomadic vision of the subject as a time continuum and a collective assemblage implies a double commitment, on the one hand to processes of change, and on the other to a strong sense of community – of our being in *this* together' (2010, p. 408, original emphasis). Being 'in this together' is not to suggest a simple universality, it is to acknowledge our co-presence and ask questions of the ethics of our encounters, especially with regard to power relationships and positionality. We ask what it means to be 'in this' for the NETDS preservice teachers, seeking a deeper understanding of, and engagement with, how they are accounting for their self-location in terms of time and place. How are they consistent, while also transforming. Thus, we are attempting to explore the pre-service teachers as becoming exceptional teachers, as determined by criteria set in the NETDS program, while they engage in the difficult, exciting, and sometimes painful work of fitting together the transformative collective assemblage that is their experience of the NETDS program.

Self, Subjectivity and the Processes of (Dis)Identification

The journeys taken by the preservice teachers in the NETDS program, whereby they found themselves in the same place and space, were disparate, challenging, and required a great deal of hard work. They all indicated a strong commitment to making a difference in the lives of children from low SES backgrounds, but for NETDS preservice teachers who come from low SES backgrounds themselves, there is an added degree of urgency. The ideas of self, identity and dis-identification become salient concepts as they make the transition into fully-fledged professional educators; ones that have been formally acknowledged in the university as 'exceptional'.

It is the case for those on the margins of society that the questions of 'who am I?' and 'why am I here?' become pressing as they try to make sense of societal positionings in the light of past experiences. Foucault's insights into the mechanisms and power relationships of those social constructions are useful for interrogating these questions. In his later years, Foucault shifted his focus from a broader examination of the processes of normalization to account for self in relation to the construction of 'other'. He discussed various techniques whereby the notion of self is objectified, one of which was dividing practices where the subject is 'divided inside himself (sic) or divided by others' and another the processes whereby the individual turns the self into a subject (Foucault 1983, p. 208), in other word subjectification. Foucault embraced the Nietzschean, 'Dare to Know', encapsulating as it did the idea that to really know oneself could be a dangerous and critical enterprise (Ford, 2009). Braidotti (2010) also recognizes the complexities involved in shifts of identity and the sense of self,

> Changes that affect one's sense of identity are especially delicate. Given that
> identifications constitute an inner scaffolding that supports one's sense of

> *identity, shifting our imaginary identifications is not as simple as casting away a*
> *used garment (p. 411).*

Braidotti (2010; 2013) identifies dis-identification as a rhizomatic process imbued with chaos, creativity, memory, stress, and paradox. Within this Braidotti invokes dis-identification as, 'the loss of cherished habits of thought and representation, which can also produce fear, sense of insecurity and nostalgia' (2010, p. 411).

The dis-identification for some preservice teachers in the NETDS program is palpable as they described their memories of past experiences and present motivations, including the stresses of a sometimes chaotic student life; the events that brought them to university and in turn into the NETDS program. In the following sections we explore some of the experiences reported by the preservice teachers in the research interviews. These include experiences prior to coming into the teacher education program, their initial feelings of being part of the NETDS program and shifting identities as they learned to trust themselves, each other and their mentors as a collective with a common purpose of making a difference to the educational outcomes of children.

Becoming Exceptional Teachers: Journeys to University

Engaging in the transformative collective assemblage that is university life certainly entails the desire and the pain that Braidotti (2010) notes. For many of the preservice teachers in the NETDS program, the desire and pain began before they set foot on campus, as they negotiated a path through complex lives and selves. Amongst the NETDS preservice teachers there are multiple pathways to university; the smallest group coming directly from school or after a one-three year gap, with most entering through further education (TAFE) or the University's enabling courses.

Many of the younger participants, like Maryanne, aged 26 years, always intended to come to university but did not know what degree they should pursue:

> *I knew I always wanted to go to uni and always initially thought I would do*
> *theatre because I'd done that all through school and got into something that was*
> *very far away from home and thought, 'I'm going to take a gap year and just*
> *have a think and do some different things'. In that time, I signed up for summer*
> *camp and that was meant to go for three months, but…I stayed for two-and-a-*
> *half years (Maryanne).*

Maryanne had been dux of her school and left with an ATAR of above 90. However, she reports being bullied by other students in high school for being "a nerd". It was not a school that had high aspirations for its students, even the more academically successful ones. As Maryanne pointed out, there was "not a great deal of talk about university or life pathways and other things". At school there were few expectations of success, and school success did not necessarily equate with university study. Maryanne's narrative points to the power of place and an assumption of lack in connection to those places that are perceived to be enscribed with poverty and chaos. So powerful are these discourses, that even as dux of her school, Maryanne felt the need to initially study through the University's enabling courses. With her identity located in a place where few went on to tertiary study, testing the waters with the enabling courses minimised Maryanne's risks as she moved towards university studies.

Liam, also 26 years old, was another high achieving school student. He says:

> *I got a better ATAR than I thought I was going to get so I tried to do the hardest*
> *thing that would use up all my points which was just a stupid idea….I shouldn't*
> *have done (bio-medical science). I ended up doing it for like two years and then*

> *quit, I didn't like it, never interested in it. Had a couple of years off and then I think, I don't know, older more ready to be at uni and stuff and realized I wanted to do teaching.*

Liam's desire to "use up all my points", pursuing the degree perceived to be most difficult and stay close to his friends, was in conflict with his long-held desire to become a teacher. Elsewhere in his interview, Liam talks of being "conned" into bio-medical science by his friends, despite support from his family to pursue his own path. Tied into the territorializing bonds of friendship is a perception that becoming a teacher is wasting your talent if you are male and a high achiever at school. For Liam, entanglements with peers and the power of the discourse that teaching is an easy, indeed wasteful, career path led him to instead pursue the 'hard' option. To talk of "hating" his study also suggests that he was engaged in complex and chaotic subjectivity work that was also bound up in friendship networks, and moving outside of these networks was a risky process.

For Rebecca though, the path to University was reasonably straightforward. Twenty-two years old at the time of our interview, Rebecca is one of the younger students in the group, she says:

> *I always when I was at school, bit of a high achiever. My sister went to university so I always sort of thought that after I finished school, that would be the next step but I wasn't quite prepared to go to uni straight after school. Was a bit stressed out from exams and whatnot so I took a year off and I did plan to travel but had a bit of trouble getting a job.*

For these three high achieving school leavers, the work of self-transformation and affirmation of themselves as becoming exceptional teachers, required some initial movement away from the physical spaces of formal schooling before returning to a university environment. They were nomadic in the literal and the figurative sense, all traveling physically away and then returning to their local community to find new ways of fitting themselves back into the collective assemblage of university, family, and community lives.

Others in the group, such as Sandy (37yrs), May (35yrs), and Kay (35yrs), told stories of never imagining themselves to be going to university and earning a degree. For them university study was a prospect a long way from the daily realm of their existence; for this group it is a significant decision with financial consequences, and sometimes relationship and family consequences (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2010). As mothers and partners, Sandy, May, and Kay all had to consider how to maintain and sustain the existing relational territories as they negotiated study commitments and university life.

After a tumultuous childhood due to negative family circumstances, including regular moves and multiple schools, Sandy thought university was not for her:

> *...it was probably twelve years ago now that a friend of mine was doing high school teaching. She used to discuss it with me and I'm like gosh that would be fantastic but I would never be able to go to uni. That's not something that I could ever do. I don't know why. It was just something that I just thought was not achievable for me... I just went, oh god no, I could never get that. I'm not smart enough to do that.*

Some years later, with encouragement from another friend, Sandy sat the university entrance exam and to her surprise was accepted into teaching. As she exclaimed, "I was blown away because I can't believe my brain worked!". Sandy's university life was at least twelve years in the making, pointing towards the long-term and delicate identity recalibration she needed to undertake before she believed she was capable of university study. It also illustrates Braidotti's (2010) point that this work is not a simple process, but is instead delicate and requires a reconstitution of our inner identity scaffolds.

For May, the return to study was a relief. May worked at a large fast food chain from age 15, "…before I even finished [Year 12] I was in the management uniform and did management". She also worked for major retail companies and in hospitality, noting that: "I actually did management through TAFE…so studying wasn't foreign to me although it had been a couple of years in between, but I just – I was just so glad to be back". She goes on to explain her motivation for her intial studies:

> I had enough, had enough of the weekends and the night work and the nightclub work and everything else, and went back to TAFE and finished my diploma, and worked in childcare from there. I had children after that and worked in between and everything.

These stories of interrupted and circuitous pathways to university demonstrate a deep resilience among this group of students. All of them have had to fight for their place; and this fight is on multiple levels – first in family, first amongst friends, partners, and then within themselves in terms of becoming a student and a future teacher. However, they also point to the multiplicity of the becomings as various moments of assemblage across lives and selves, forging new connections (Nilan & Wibawanto, 2015) and claiming new territories (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) on their journeys.

Fitting Into the Collective Assemblage: 'Have I Tricked Them?'

The experience of being invited to participate in the NETDS program and to be part of a group labeled as 'exceptional' created mixed feelings for many of these preservice teachers. Being in a space with like-minded peers was a powerful collective moment that drew reactions of affirmation, intimidation, and surprise, but also of doubt and a feeling of added pressure. In Australia there is a powerful cultural impost not to stand out in any intellectual way, to the point that it is labelled, the 'tall poppy syndrome'. Negotiating their way through a culture of dismissiveness and derision with regard to academic success is an especially difficult place for those preservice teachers who did not expect to be at university at all, far less in a class deemed to be exceptional. Some experienced doubt, like Katherine who said:

> I sometimes sit there and think, do I belong in here? I really do sit and think - I like to take my time to process things, where these guys go bang, bang, bang and I'm like - are you crazy?

Others mirrored Katherine's statement of dislocation and disjuncture. Maryanne reported that, "When we got the (NETDS) calls and all that kind of thing, I thought, have I tricked them? Am I supposed to be here?". Carol went further, noting that, "[When I was called] I just thought there must have been a mistake. Maybe someone else pulled out or something and so I was the last resort and they chose me". Many students indicated that they did not consider themselves to be doing anything more than average; the idea of excellence or being 'exceptional' was not something they had considered. Common responses included this one from Nancy, "When I did get the phone call it was like oh, I didn't realise I was [laughs] doing that well".

For others though, it was the fillip they needed to maintain motivation. For example, Marjorie stated:

> I really needed that boost because I've been doing it [university study] for so long and just dragging myself through it. … Then to get that phone call [inviting her to apply to the program] I was buzzing for weeks, it was great.

These disparate responses to joining the NETDS illustrate the complexity of preservice teachers' selves and the 'radical repositioning' (Braidotti, 2010, p. 411), that is done as they engage in transformative university experiences.

Moving Through Exceptionality: A Collective Assemblage

It is within the process of shifting a historically constructed identity that creates potential for change. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 275) suggest that 'the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming'. This position points towards the movement and transformative potential of selves, rather than a fixed or constant self. In the context of the NETDS class group what seemed to occur for these preservice teachers was recognition of themselves and others with a common purpose; a reshaping of selves within the emergence of a collective assemblage. According to Nilan & Wibawanto (2015, p. 63), 'Assemblages are multifaceted arrangements of materials, bodies, expressions, actions joining together; ''fixing or fitting'' – sometimes fleetingly – to enact new ways of operating'. The momentary landscape of the tutorial took place over eight, one hour sessions when the NETDS preservice teachers were in the same room at the same time. Disidentification and to some extent re-identification was a journey they took in this new space inhabited by exceptional pre-service teachers. In the first few weeks amongst the buzz and excitement there was also discomfort, trepidation, and nervousness – a pressure to perform – but there was also an emerging sense of group identity. Braidotti's (2010, 413) point that, 'we have to learn to think differently about ourselves and we can only do so together', is reflected in the students' comments upon their engagement with the NETDS program.

For us as academics, we made a deliberate effort to take a pedagogical stance that was somewhat different to our usual undergraduate teaching from the outset. Understanding, and being sensitive to, the knowledge that some students in this group would themselves come from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds was key. As was building trust in the group, enabling us to work towards shifting the relationships of power from teacher-student to relationships of collegiality. Within this 'risk-ridden affair' (Braidotti, 2010) of new collective assemblages within the university we attempted to create spaces for students to take risks with their own learning and to challenge their own thinking.

At times the sense of self and disidentification was writ large on the pedagogical landscape. Kay describes her reaction as she engaged in descriptions of disadvantage in the readings and discussions:

> *You don't really see yourself as being there until it's actually identified in another person's circumstances, ... so that was a bit harsh on me. Not harsh, but it was a bit hard to take in. It's like oh, okay, because you don't really see yourself as being really low socio-economic or, I'm going to use this expression, but at the bottom of the barrel, if you like.*

At the same time it became an affirmation of why she wanted to become a teacher:

> *Some of the readings were kind of like oh, okay, really bringing home for me some of the reasons why the choices I've made have been so important to me.*

On the other hand, others who identified themselves as from relatively stable and advantaged backgrounds, were also confronted by their own beliefs. For example, David explains the dislocation and transformation of learning through the degree:

> *The sociology of education course really sort of destroyed me at the time because you have all of these preformed sort of assumptions that you don't do those sort of self-assessments in day-to-day life. You have a certain lens of the world and you just go about your business operating through it. So yeah, a lot of this teaching degree has made you reformulate all that, restructure it in your own mind.*

These are examples of the becoming exceptional and the assembling of brief moments of transformation in the risk and chaos of learning. Whilst discussing challenging and sometime confronting issues, we did explicitly acknowledge the collective experience within

the group. From our perspective it was important that the preservice teachers' voices were heard as part of the conversation. Kay expressed her appreciation for the public recognition of past experiences:

> *They're (lecturers) saying we know you know your business. We understand where you're coming from. So that's nice. It's nice to have that little bit of acknowledgement that we don't have to prove ourselves all the time.*

Others also commented on the supportive atmosphere. Julie, for example, noted that:

> *Where I've learnt the most in the course and where (lecturers) are really supportive of everything, is that they really give you the opportunity to share things with your peers, and they - and share with us their personal things that have happened, personal experiences and they really give you a platform to put it all out there.*

As the group became more used to each other, many interviewed talked of relaxing and commented on the growth of the group dynamic. Marjorie explained:

> *It's funny too because some of those people I have thought they've had that attitude [of being competitive], but once we've been in this group it's like they've relaxed. Everyone just thinks, well we're all the ones that are doing well I suppose. Yeah, it's good, it's nice; it feels like a real close group.*

The preservice teachers began to appreciate being in a group of high achievers, they worked hard and remained focused on the tasks. May sums up some of these views:

> *I think coming together, being likeminded students and knowing that we all achieved a certain result to get where we were and we all have a common theme together, I think that's really important. Knowing that we're not just attending the tutorial because we have to, we actually want to be there, and people coming in the weeks where we didn't have to just to get together and chat, I think that was really remarkable. ... Definitely kind of special being part of the group, for sure, and having that in common.*

Liam also had similar sentiments:

> *I've really liked this NETDS class so far. I think it's, I guess, to be expected and everyone said this. It's good to have keen people all together and I don't know, the conversation is better, the discussion is more flowing.*

As the NETDS cohort settled into the routine and became more familiar with working with others they knew to be hardworking and reliable the benefits emerged. It was evident that the group was becoming more comfortable with each other. There was a nearly full attendance for classes and the group requested additional sessions, which again were attended by almost all. They were always prepared and completed any readings and tasks set. For many of the NETDS preservice teachers the shared experiences of being in an educationally challenging site has contributed to and affirmed their sense of selves as emerging professionals planning to work with socially and economically disadvantaged students. This collective assemblage in a university classroom was by its nature temporary, and the first NETDS cohort has now graduated and taken up positions as classroom teachers in schools. Our current records, six months into the new school year, show that out of thirty-one graduates from the NETDS program, nineteen are working in low socio-economic schools and seven in other schools. All except three are working in government schools and fourteen are full-time. Over the coming years we will continue to monitor their progress in the education system.

Conclusion

Australian culture has an uncomfortable relationship with intellectual accomplishment, preferring to celebrate sporting achievements. The notion of being 'exceptional', within the criteria set by the NETDS program was not an easy label for most of these NETDS preservice teachers, but for those who themselves come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, it was even more confronting. The journeys to university were diverse, often challenging and sometimes circuitous. There were mixed reactions when invited to be part of the NETDS project, but increasingly the preservice teachers were able to identify as a part of a group with a common purpose and in the process became more comfortable with their identity as 'exceptional'.

Their biographies and personal journeys to the project reflect complex, multi-layered influences. There are indications of gendered positioning, a perceived low status of education as a pathway for successful students in high school, self-imposed constructions as learners and negative assumptions about abilities that deserve further treatment, but are outside the scope of this paper. More work is also required to interrogate the notion of 'exceptional', including what it means for NETDS pre-service teachers and for teaching more broadly.

Tertiary students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and mature age students face challenges at university, which is often a culturally unfamiliar place. For many, study has to be balanced with work and family commitments. We cannot lose sight of the fact that despite these challenges the preservice teachers in the NETDS program achieved the highest academic outcomes in their year; committed themselves to the program and volunteered to put themselves into some of the most challenging schools in their area. For them, becoming exceptional as a preservice teacher was challenging, delicate and risky. But the risk of questioning themselves, and who they are capable of becoming as exceptional, has also been a process of collective assemblage and affirmative hope.

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Acknowledgements