

2017

Forward to Special Issue: Teacher Education for High Poverty Schools

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Recommended Citation

Lampert, J., & Burnett, B. (2017). Forward to Special Issue: Teacher Education for High Poverty Schools. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(4).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2017v42n4.1>

This Forward is posted at Research Online.

<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol42/iss4/1>

Forward

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Introduction

The six papers in this special issue are all related, in one way or another, to the *National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools program* (NETDS). NETDS began in 2009 at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia, and with the support of philanthropy expanded to another six universities nationally. Although the papers in this issue are all *related* to NETDS, they are not necessarily *about* NETDS; rather, they reflect the range of scholarship taking place within this emerging network and provide a window on how teacher education for high poverty schools within mainstream Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs can be done differently. Together, the papers draw on the scholarship of researchers who were already respected experts in the field of teacher education and high poverty schools prior to involving themselves in the program. The first five papers are written by scholars from the seven Australian universities who now deliver NETDS programs. The remaining paper is by researchers who are part of the extended international NETDS network, in this case, from Spain. Collectively, these papers represent a broad coalition of scholars with whom we collaborate and who are engaged with the NETDS program at both theoretical and practical levels. Importantly, all contributing authors share the common goal of shifting how teachers work with students who have been historically marginalised and disadvantaged.

The NETDS Program

There is widespread agreement that teachers need a deep understanding of equity, social justice and the socio-cultural context to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2016). However, ITE in Australia has tended to provide such preparation in an ad hoc manner that is largely dependent on the individual commitment of academics or Faculty leadership, and is always vulnerable to changing politics, a crowded ITE curriculum, new sets of professional standards and ongoing accreditation. Historically, we have seen significant Australian ITE programs designed to address disadvantage, such as Connell's *Disadvantaged Schools Program* (White, Johnston, & Connell, 1991) and Western Sydney University's *Fair Go Project* (Munns, Sawyer, & Cole, 2013). Such ITE programs have had foundational impact as they demonstrate the profound commitment of many teacher educators who believe there is more work to be done to meet the aims of a well-informed teaching workforce that can make a powerful difference in the lives of students in urban, regional and remote high poverty communities. All of the authors in this special issue share the belief that our key priority should be finding permanent space within university-based, mainstream ITE programs to trial, improve, research and graduate the 'best', most committed, social justice

oriented teachers for schools serving low SES communities. Of course, defining ‘the best teachers’ for these settings is difficult, politicised and often contentious (Connell, 2009).

Because we have written extensively about NETDS elsewhere, we have decided not to do so again here within this special issue. Instead, we provide a very brief summary of the program and the critical role that philanthropy has played in its growth and success. The pre-implementation research that initially informed NETDS indicated that leading graduate teachers from QUT were being ‘cherry-picked’ on graduation by more affluent state and independent schools. We believe this in itself to be a political issue that highlights long-standing patterns of inequitable distribution, one of Nancy Fraser’s (2014) dimensions of social justice. The issue of distribution is related to the idea of ‘teacher sorting’ (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002), whereby poor or ‘disadvantaged’ students, communities and schools are perceived as needing a particular kind of teacher (caring, willing), while others (e.g. elite independent schools) are perceived as needing (or possibly even deserving) ‘more academic’ content-rich teachers. NETDS was developed as a direct response to the issue of distribution, but was also linked to our earlier research with stakeholders, such as state and federal government departments of education, school principals, teachers, pre-service teachers and communities. These ‘end-users’ repeatedly told us that teachers needed to have general attributes and dispositions such as ‘being caring’, ‘believing in students’, and ‘having high expectations’. However, in addition, the stakeholders said teachers with a particular set of more specific skills were urgently needed: being knowledgeable about high poverty settings and highly motivated to teach in them; possessing an understanding of cultural diversity and a strong anti-racism commitment; and having the capacity to engage with community in positive ways. The stakeholders also wished that high poverty schools could more often employ ‘high content’ teachers who can teach the ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2008) that is perceived to open new options for students in high poverty schools. In other words, the vast majority of stakeholders believed that high expectations without genuine opportunity constituted merely an empty promise. As we have previously written, it is all very well to believe that a young person can grow up to be a rocket scientist or a doctor; however, without someone teaching them the Physics, Biology or Senior English along the way, then this is just magical thinking (Lampert & Burnett, 2014, p. 122).

We were strongly motivated by historical graduation data from our university that followed national trends with only 35.3% of top-performing teacher graduates (GPA > 6) beginning their careers in high poverty schools (2007–2010). Thus we saw a clear need to develop some form of intervention and directed our energies around solutions to the following five related issues:

1. attracting the highest achieving pre-service teachers into a specific program targeting poverty
2. creating a modified curriculum around social justice
3. mentoring these pre-service teachers’ exposure to challenging high poverty professional-experience placements
4. engaging the profession in strategic partnerships to ensure graduate employment
5. further researching the outcomes and impact of the model in terms of quality teaching in low SES schools.

Currently, the NETDS program remains unique in that it is housed within an Australian *mainstream* ITE program and specifically addresses ITE in a way that systematically merges on-campus curriculum with a highly mentored professional experience in partnership (in and with) high poverty schools. In addition, NETDS facilitates various forms of networked employment

pathways that ensure these pre-service teachers are known to the low SES schools that overwhelmingly employ them on graduation. Since graduating the first NETDS cohort in 2011, there has been a 250% increase in high achieving graduates from the original ‘flagship’ program at QUT now working as teachers in low SES schools. In addition, because the NETDS program has now been running for eight years and is situated within a mainstream ITE university-based context, the research arm is also somewhat unique in its reach.¹ We continue to be influenced by social justice scholars such as Arnetta Ball (Stanford), Tyrone Howard (UCLA) and Marilyn Cochran-Smith (Boston University), all of whom have subsequently worked directly with us, informing our pedagogy on reflexivity, culturally appropriate pedagogies and approaching deficit (Lampert & Burnett, 2015). In various ways, this network has now expanded to Spain, Hungary, Brazil, New Zealand and Canada, and we believe NETDS is a product of ‘real world’ scholarship where our collective research informs our collective practice, allowing us to improve the program while generating new knowledge and theory.

New Relationships between Philanthropy and Teacher Education²

While philanthropic interest in education is not new, it has grown substantially over the previous decade (Gasman, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Morsy, 2015). Despite some ongoing questioning of philanthropists’ motivation in this space (Gasman, 2012; Morsy, 2015; Thumler, Bogelein, Beller & Anheir, 2014), challenges in public education expenditure and increasing complexity in public education policy have encouraged a number of philanthropic foundations to look to education investment to contribute to broader social outcomes. Despite an increased willingness to invest in education from the philanthropic sector, many staff involved in mainstream teacher education programs in Australia have limited experience in working with philanthropic partners. Indeed the first national survey on philanthropy in education in Australia (surveying schools, philanthropic bodies and not for profit groups, Anderson & Curtin, 2011) reported that 92% of school respondents considered themselves new or novices to philanthropic grant seeking.

In early 2013, with the support of Social Ventures Australia (SVA), we were invited to develop a formal submission to the Origin Foundation targeting the expansion of NETDS into other Australian universities. In making the decision to support the proposal, Sean Barrett (Head of Origin Foundation) states the foundation was influenced by the centrality of education in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and the poorer education outcomes for children in low SES communities. The foundation also drew on research it was funding, namely the Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy project, as data from this project showed a distinct misalignment between what school principals thought was important and wanted, and what philanthropy was funding. Importantly, the data highlighted that principals valued teacher quality far higher than philanthropy did, particularly in low socio-economic schools (Anderson & Curtin, 2011). While 2 new philanthropic partners later joined the program in 2015 (each supporting one university), the overall infrastructure of program support remained part of the QUT-Origin Foundation partnership.

¹ Aspects of the research in this paper were supported under Australian Research Council’s Linkage Projects funding scheme (project number LP 140100613: Exceptional teachers for disadvantaged schools: A longitudinal study of graduates at work in low socio-economic status schools). Support was also provided by the Queensland Department of Education and Training.

² We acknowledge the input into this section from Sean Barrett (Head of the Origin Foundation) and Professor Emeritus Wendy Patton (Former Executive Dean, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology).

The ‘Scaling-up’ of NETDS

It is important to note that the funding was not solely for QUT; rather it supported QUT staff to work with other Australian universities to develop the principles of NETDS within their own mainstream teacher education programs. A significant portion of the funding support was to provide salary to release academic staff from universities who were choosing to expand their offering with the NETDS program so as to undertake all planning and preparation activity, and to develop their modified curriculum. A measure of the program’s long term sustainability was seen as the embedding of NETDS into the mainstream teacher education program already accredited and operating. The new universities developed their programs via the implementation of a two-year (5 phase) support model, developed and facilitated by QUT staff. Mindful of the importance of building collaboration and trust with partner universities, the model focused on relationship building as an underpinning of the capacity building and knowledge sharing goal. The model incorporates *Orientation, Induction, Planning and Customisation, Implementation, and Learning and Sharing*.

Following discussions between Faculty Heads of QUT and new participating universities, and development and sign off of formal funding and service agreements, QUT Project Leaders travelled to the new participating university to meet with staff proposed to become project leaders in that institution to *orient* them to the program and the expectations of the funding agreement. Two staff from each new participating university then travelled to QUT to spend a week of *Induction*, working with QUT Project Leaders, meeting with school principals and with current students. This week covered all aspects of curriculum development and the data collection expectations of each university. This induction week culminated in the partner universities outlining how they would undertake *Planning and Customisation*, that is, incorporating NETDS into their existing program. Importantly, QUT staff provided ongoing support and while still in its early phase, it is proposed to develop a national network of NETDS teacher educators and school teachers to ensure ongoing *Learning and sharing* through a professional development and capacity building framework.

The relationships that have been established between NETDS and its main funders, (Origin Foundation, Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation and the Eureka Benevolent Foundation) are key aspects of its ongoing success. However all funders and partner universities involved, recognise the importance of not just delivering on the agreed ‘deliverables’ set out in the original proposal, but also the need to provide demonstrable evidence of the impact the funding has achieved.

Significance and Controversy

NETDS research has generated important outcomes within an area deemed of critical national significance and has been successful in attracting high achieving education students, preparing well-prepared teachers and facilitating their employment in high poverty schools. There are nonetheless, ongoing complexities in the conceptualisation, design and implementation of NETDS. To a degree, such complexities are healthy because the process of implementation into other universities has involved a self-reflexive (Santoro, Reid, Mayer, & Singh, 2012) shared journey, with the model proving adaptable and capable of being customised to the participating schools’ institutional and state-specific environments. Hence, in this context, all

good innovation is generative (Gale, 2006). The papers in this special issue indicate some of the complexities of the NETDS program that are related to shifting policy landscapes and discourses that have, in unanticipated ways, become increasingly polarising since the start of NETDS in 2009. These include:

- the increasingly politicised, complex and controversial discourses about quality teaching and quality teachers
- the tendency to binarise in ways that force us to choose, for instance, between ‘high achieving’ teachers and caring teachers
- the mistaken deficit assumption, even among academics, that working class or culturally diverse pre-service teachers will not be represented among high achieving ITE students (Lampert & Burnett, 2016)
- the unexplored or undifferentiated conflation of ideas, such as entry debates into teacher education programs vs. the achievement of Grade Point Average once students are enrolled in ITE.
- the unique complexities for those of us who do reconstructive and deconstructive work: in other words, those who “get our hands dirty” yet also engage with theory.

Special Issue

The seven articles selected for this special issue provide a snapshot of just some of the issues and research about teacher education for high poverty schools. We begin the issue with a paper by Scholes, Lampert, Burnett, Comber, and Hoff, which sifts through the complexities and controversies that have emerged as the NETDS program became unintentionally immersed in the ‘quality teacher and quality teaching’ debate. This paper attempts to ‘unstitch’ the complex political sides taken as educators across the globe attempt to make a difference through teacher education.

In the second paper, Naidoo and D’Warte write through experience about the long-term work of Western Sydney University and their engagement with teacher education in Greater Western Sydney. It is important in the context of this paper to recognise the influence and groundwork played by Western Sydney University’s *Fair Go Project* to the formation of the NETDS program, especially in terms of producing graduating teachers who resist ‘deficit’ thinking and understand the cultural and economic backgrounds and the diversity of students in low SES contexts.

Ailwood and Ford, in the third paper, draw on Braidotti’s theorising of ‘nomadic subjectivity’ to explore how their pre-service teachers ‘become’ exceptional. This paper reports on their initial research interviews with their pre-service teachers, which explore their participants’ own schooling background, their pathways in university, their reasons for choosing teaching and their experiences of teacher education and the NETDS project.

In the fourth paper, Toe and Longaretti analyse what principals believe graduate teachers need to know to perform well within low SES communities. This paper was written from the position that partnerships between schools and universities are a crucial component of successful teacher preparation.

In the fifth paper, Takayama, Jones, and Amazan critique some activities around their teacher education program for high poverty schools, and offer their own reflections on running a program at a distance.

Finally, we end with Garcia-Carrion, Gomez, Molina and Ionescu, who expand a vision of what is possible in Learning Communities, which are an international community-based project targeting the transformation of education and schools through dialogic learning.

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