

Teacher Education targeting High-Poverty Schools: The National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools Program

Objectives

This paper examines the Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (ETDS) program and demonstrates how the successful outcomes from this innovative teacher education model targeting the high-poverty schooling sector have been used to expand the model across other Australian universities. The paper begins by outlining the parameters of ETDS and argues that the program has responded to increased demands for quality teachers within high-poverty schools by moving away from a traditional ‘missionary’ (Larabee, 2010) or deficit (Comber and Kamler 2004; Flessa, 2007) approach. The paper stresses the importance to ETDS of privileging notions of quality within a framework of (a) academic excellence, (b) a modified teacher education curriculum, (c) targeted practicums and (d) a network of jurisdictional and school-based partnerships. The paper aims to demonstrate the degree to which ETDS has reversed the widespread trend highlighted by Grossman and Loeb (2010, p. 245) of “[p]lacing the least experienced teachers with the most needy students”.

The paper:

1. Reports on the EDTS model of teacher education and how it identifies the highest-achieving pre-service teachers at the end of their 2nd year, offers them a specialised curriculum and supports their practicum experience in a network of high-poverty partner schools.
2. Presents data from the ETDS program that demonstrates 91% of graduates from the 2nd cohort (87% of the combined cohorts) have secured employment as teachers within high-poverty Australian schools.
3. Outlines the impact of a philanthropic grant of 2 million dollars (AUD) that will allow the expansion of the ETDS model into other teacher education university courses across Australia.

Perspectives or theoretical framework

The Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools program constitutes an alternative model of teacher education targeting schools variously described as *high-poverty*, (Knapp, 1995), *urban* (Obidah & Howard, 2005), *disadvantaged* (Connell, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 2006), *low SES* (Battistich et al. 1995), *hard-to-staff* (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Castro et al. 2010), *high-needs* (Levin & Quinn, 2003) or *at-risk* (Ferfolja, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2008). Despite this range of descriptors we use the term *disadvantage* to encapsulate the explicit links between levels of socio-economic disadvantage and lower educational learning outcomes for students within such school settings.

At a foundational level, the ETDS program was first conceived as a means of addressing the achievement gap in student learning outcomes that exist between ‘advantaged’ and ‘disadvantaged’ schools (Darling-Hammond 2006) and in particular how this could be achieved within the context of an existing mainstream four-year teacher education degree. We approached the design of ETDS using research on teacher quality such as the work of Hattie (2003) and the pressures for what Anderson and Stillman (2013, p.4) describe as a move towards “more time-intensive, context specific and high-quality clinical experiences”. ETDS addresses pressure on teacher education programs to demonstrate how programs ‘value-add’ within an increasingly public discourse that focuses on getting highly qualified teachers in classrooms serving at-risk children. Given there is a large body of research suggesting that ‘good teaching’ outweighs other variables such as class size or composition (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2008) and that teachers themselves account for about 30 percent of variance in student achievement (Hattie, 2003), ETDS has focused on how to best mediate the learnings, beliefs and attitude change of a hand-picked cohort of the highest academically achieving preservice teachers. While these

broad parameters have been central to how we have structured ETDS, we have also been strongly influenced at a theoretical level by Bourdieu's perspectives on social class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and our desire to blend on-campus components of ETDS with what Gay & Howard (2000), Villegas & Lucas (2002) and Cochran-Smith (2004) have shown to be the potential for practicum experience "to play a crucial role in building ... multicultural capacities, equity-oriented knowledge bases, critical inquiry skills and reform mindedness" (Anderson and Stillman, 2013 p.4).

The ETDS program uses Bourdieu's notions of *Cultural Capital* and *Habitus* to counter many of the ingrained views of poverty and disadvantage widely held by both preservice and practicing teachers. Central to this theoretical foundation is an on-campus curriculum that overtly critiques reductive forms of reasoning (see for example critiques of Ruby Payne such as Ng & Rury, 2006) that attempt to explain the complex and multifaceted environments of high-poverty schools through overly simplistic causal descriptions. The ETDS program draws heavily on Bourdieu so as to enable the ETDS cohort of mostly white and middle-class preservice teachers to reflect on the dynamics of their teaching within culturally dissimilar high poverty settings. By focusing for example on what Bourdieu calls 'situational hysteresis', the on-campus component of ETDS underscores mismatches between preservice teachers existing habitus (as middle-class, white and privileged teachers) and the field, where they may unwittingly lapse into their old default positions during practicum. Practicum within this context serves the crucial role as a platform for a 'destabilized habitus, torn by contradiction and internal division' (Bourdieu, 2000 cited by Steinmetz, 2011 p.52).

Methods, techniques or points of inquiry

Prior to its expansion nationally, ETDS was the only Australian mainstream 4-year Bachelor of Education program that overtly addressed teacher capacity in high poverty schools through a cohort-model where preservice teachers are equipped to teach and encouraged to select employment in low SES schools. Through an objective selection process (top 5-10% in terms of GPA), targeted field experience placements, customised curriculum and active mentoring within key schools, the project has now prepared 3 cohorts of high achieving teacher education students with the 4th cohort commencing the program in 2013. Each cohort consists of Elementary and High School Bachelor of Education preservice teachers who are selected on the basis of academic performance over the first two years of their degree (GPA 5.8 and above); a demonstrated commitment to the project's objectives and requirements; and a firm understanding of the cultural and socio-economic factors that impact student educational outcomes. ETDS participants engage with an on-campus curriculum focusing on the dynamics of low SES schooling before going out on their field experience/practicum. As part of the ETDS program participants undertake their 2nd, 3rd, 4th field experience and final Internship placements in a range of high-poverty school locations across urban, regional and remote locations.

Data sources, evidence, objects or materials

On the basis of data from the first two graduating cohorts (2011, 2012) it is evident that the ETDS program reverses an existing trend where high achieving graduating teachers are either promptly employed by more privileged schools or simply fail to consider directing their skills to the high-poverty settings where they are greatly needed. Now in its 4th year of operation, ETDS has graduated 43 students (2 cohorts of teachers), with a further 18 teachers graduating in a third cohort at the end of 2013 and a further 35 beginning the program in July 2013. Graduate destination data shows that 91% of the 2nd cohort (87% of the combined cohorts) are now employed as teachers within high-poverty schools.

Previous BEd Graduates 2007-2011 (Similar GPA profile to ETDS >6.0)	ETDS Cohort 1 2011 Graduates	ETDS Cohort 2 2012 Graduates
85.5% or 71/83 employed as teachers in schools in their first year after graduation	94% or 17/18 employed in schools as teachers in their first year after graduation	96% or 24/25 employed in schools as teachers in their first year after graduation
1039: Average school ICSEA	913 Average school ICSEA • Lowest school ICSEA: 614	932 Average school ICSEA: • Lowest school ICSEA: 861
35.3% working in schools with ICSEA levels <1000	82.35% or 14/17 working in schools with ICSEA levels <1000	91.66% 22/24 working in schools with ICSEA levels <1000
64.7% or 46/71 working in schools with ICSEA levels >1000	17.65% or 3/17 working in schools with ICSEA levels >1000	8.3% or 2/24 working in schools with ICSEA levels >1000

Table 1

ETDS graduate destinations compared to previous high-achieving BEd graduates

NB: ICSEA or Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, is a government index that uses Australian Bureau of Statistics and school-based data to reflect levels of socio-economic disadvantage and how this impacts on national benchmark test performance in the school - 1000 is the Australian mean.

Results and/or substantiated conclusions

ETDS together with the support of Social Ventures Australia (an independent non-profit organisation that supports investment in social change) submitted a proposal to the philanthropic Origin Foundation to share the teacher education model with other Australian universities. In June 2013, the ETDS expansion proposal was successfully funded with a philanthropic grant of two million dollars so as to achieve three core components that seek to expand the model's reach, impact, and ensure its long-term sustainability. These three components – of what is now termed the National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS) program – will ensure:

1. The managed scaling of ETDS to 6 Faculties / Schools of Education over 3.5 years, graduating up to 210 new high-achieving highly- prepared teachers working in the low SES schooling sector annually;
2. The continued development of the existing 'flagship' ETDS program including the extension of mentoring to graduate ETDS teachers; and
3. The development of a scholarly network that emphasizes long term research and evaluation of impact across a national network targeting teacher education for high-poverty schools.

Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

While there is little consensus on what constitutes 'teacher quality' and increasing debate about the impact of various types of mainstream versus alternative entry teacher preparation (Ng & Rury, 2006), there is overwhelming agreement for the need for teacher education programs to specifically prepare quality teachers for work in high poverty schools (Cochran-Smith et al. 2012). This can be seen in across North America, Europe and the Asia Pacific, where the focus on new categories of high-needs disadvantaged students emerges within policy initiatives such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) in the United States and the Australian *Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program* (2010), as well as reports from Canada (Levin, 2004) and the UK (Aldridge et al. 2011). Each policy/report, in various ways addresses the explicit connections between poverty and disadvantage and a student's subsequent educational participation, success, and performance. Paralleling this major shift in focus is a growing body of academic literature critiquing how poorly the mostly middle-class teaching workforce is equipped to engage with low SES and culturally diverse students (Sleeter & Grant 2003; Cochran-Smith

et al. 2004; Sleeter, 2008). In addition, data shows teacher graduates within the top quartile (in terms of their academic test scores) are far less likely to begin their teaching careers within disadvantaged schools (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), with those high-quality graduates accepting such positions leaving high poverty schools after a relatively short periods of employment (Delpit, 2012). Hence there is little disagreement about the growing need for teacher educators to explore innovative and sustainable models that draw on the role of theory, practice and reflection to provide a solid conceptual base for culturally responsive preservice teachers. This paper sets out how one such model has responded in innovative ways to the challenge and argues that NETDS holds the potential to make significant impact within both teacher education and the high-poverty schooling sector.

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