Promising Practices

The National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools Initiative in Australia

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This case study describes a “promising practice” drawn from an OECD review of initial teacher preparation in Australia from 22-26 May 2017.

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Context

In all countries that took part in PISA 2015, socio-economic status continued to have a significant impact on student performance (OECD, 2018a[1]). Although in Australia the impact of socio-economic status on student attainment is lower than the OECD average (OECD, 2016[2]), the country still faces important challenges addressing the poorer attainment outcomes of particular groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (OECD, 2013[3]).

Equity, or the lack of it, is not a given feature of educational systems, and there is a wide range of policy initiatives that can alleviate the effect of students’ socio-economic backgrounds. These include, among others, raising access to and quality of early childhood education and care, improving the inclusion of culturally diverse students, supporting those students more in need or delaying school repetition and tracking (OECD, 2018b[4]). A key element for ensuring a better system is the quality of its teacher workforce and the extent to which these teachers are experienced and equipped to deal with the specific challenges and contexts that affect students’ learning (Barber and Mourshed, 2007[5]).

However, it is often not easy to recruit and retain highly effective teachers to work in more challenging and diverse communities. On average, teachers in disadvantaged schools tend to have less experience and fewer qualifications, and these schools are more likely to report a shortage of teachers (OECD, 2018[6]). According to TALIS, disadvantaged schools and schools located in rural and remote locations in Australia tend to have between 3% and 10% more teachers with five years of experience or fewer (OECD, 2014[7]). Other reports focusing on teachers and diversity (OECD, 2010[8]) have also emphasised the difficulties in attracting highly-qualified teachers to disadvantaged schools, and how even the best early career teachers in these schools often leave within a short period of time. In particular, attracting experienced teachers to rural and remote schools continues to be a persistent challenge in Australia, although some promising initiatives have been launched to reverse this trend (Halsey, 2018[9]).

One of these initiatives is National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS), which was originally developed by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2008. After ten years, this initiative is now being implemented by seven other universities in a number of other states, initially with the financial support of Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and a philanthropic organisation, the Origin Foundation (Social Ventures Australia, 2018[10]).

How does NETDS work?

Design

NETDS is an academic learning model that uses a modified curriculum, mentorship, and professional experience in strategic settings to prepare high achieving, final year, pre-service teachers for employment and careers in disadvantaged schools. It aims “…to
support the best and brightest graduate teachers to teach in the schools that need them most.” (Social Ventures Australia, 2018[10]). Strategic partnerships with the profession help to provide graduates with a pathway into employment.

Selection into the programme is primarily based on a student’s grade point average over the first two years of their Bachelor of Education degree. The designers of the programme Jo Lampert and Bruce Burnett describe its approach as follows:

“The [N]ETDS cohort is offered a targeted 3rd year tutorial in socio-cultural studies, and regular opportunities to participate in professional conferences with experienced teachers ... Alongside the teaching of crucial theory on issues such as schooling, poverty and disadvantage, [N]ETDS participants are asked to identify areas as they require specialised information or guidance. Students are then offered expert workshops or seminars to address the need, as in a session on behaviour management led by expert principals of National Partnership schools in low socio-economic communities ... An important element in the [N]ETDS curriculum is that it offers students in-depth experience of teaching in disadvantaged urban and regional school settings, pairing [N]ETDS participants with expert teacher-mentors in schools in which [N]ETDS has nurtured strong and reciprocal relationships.” (Lampert and Burnett, 2011[11])

Findings

Lampert and Burnett also report that:

“Preliminary data from the pilot group and school-based teacher-supervisors points to three overriding themes or beliefs. These are that quality teachers for disadvantaged schools must have a particular ‘passion’ for teaching in disadvantaged schools; that knowledge of low-SES contexts is crucial to success; and that, though there might be a set of personal qualities or characteristics (such as resilience) that are desirable for such teachers to possess, high academic achievement is equally important in identifying high-quality teachers for the schools that need them most. A high grade point average has proven a strong measure of success, with principals regularly commending the ability of [N]ETDS students to teach deep knowledge in complex classrooms. Most surprising has been evidence suggesting that a belief in social justice can be taught. Though some of the [N]ETDS pilot cohort began the programme with passion for social justice, for others it grew as they gained knowledge, skills and confidence in their ability to make a difference.” (Lampert and Burnett, 2011[11])

In terms of the programme’s impact on employment outcomes for its participants, approximately 90% of NETDS graduates choose to work in low socio-economic status schools (Department of Education and Training, 2018[12]). An example of impact in terms of an individual initial teacher education provider is that there has been a 250% increase in the number of high achieving graduates from the Queensland University of Technology working in low SES schools (Social Ventures Australia, 2018[10]).

It is estimated that over 100 schools across the four states are benefiting from the initiative (Social Ventures Australia, 2018[10]). One of the specific benefits is that these schools now have greater numbers of specialist teachers teaching in their discipline area.

Meering Anderson graduated from the NETDS programme in 2014. Meering is quoted as saying “Many students don’t have supportive role models at home, so positive teacher interactions are hugely important and really help them to thrive” (Social Ventures
Australia, 2018(10). The programme supports this by providing graduates with a framework for better understanding student behaviours and the effects of generational poverty.

An Australian Research Council Linkage Funded Grant (LP140100613) project entitled Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools: A Longitudinal Study of Graduates at Work in Low Socio-Economic Status Schools is working in partnership with the Queensland Department of Education and Training to investigate how NETDS graduate teachers are enacting quality teaching in low socio-economic schools (Comber, 2014[13]).

Why is it a strength?

The programme is a strength because it:

- Helps to align the needs of students and employers with the output of ITE programmes. There are concerns that teacher preparation programmes are slow to adapt to schools and employer needs. Through the initial efforts of one university, and the support of third parties, a specific programme is being offered to ensure that pre-service teachers are prepared to teach well in demanding contexts.

- Helps to increase the supply of effective teachers to areas where there are often shortages. As noted, schools in disadvantaged and remote areas sometimes struggle with attracting and retaining teachers. This programme increases the supply of teachers to some of those areas of need by providing pathways that give teachers experience and confidence in those settings.

- Offers a model for scaling-up successful initiatives. The NETDS programme was first developed and implemented in one university but it has been able to grow and influence other university programmes thanks to its positive results. This is an example of the sort of approach that can potentially bring considerable benefit to ITE in Australia.

How could it be improved?

There are opportunities to get even further benefit from the programme by:

- Reaching out to more students within teacher education programmes. Although the Australian Professional Standards expects teachers to meet the learning needs of students from diverse backgrounds, increased attention to the particular lives of students from low socio-economic contexts and knowledge of social justice issues should be offered to all teacher candidates as a core part of their training in order to fulfil these expectations.

- Enhancing the scale and sustainability of the programme. As noted, the programme has been scaled up through philanthropic funding and its sustainability is dependent on that funding. Greater involvement by education authorities could help to expand both the reach and the sustainability of the programme.
For more information


