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Conceptualising Early Career Teachers' Agency and Accounts of Social Action in Disadvantaged Schools

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Abstract: This article examines the accounts of actions undertaken by Early Career Teachers (ECTs) recently graduated from a social justice-oriented Initial Teacher Education (ITE) program and employed in complex school settings with high levels of student diversity, disadvantage, and poverty. The study drew on theories of teacher agency and agency more broadly to examine the workshadowing observations of the teachers' practice in classrooms augmented by their reflective accounts in interviews. The study found that the ECTs' agency, or contextualised social action, can be conceptualised as temporally embedded social engagement directed at addressing their students' cultural, social and academic needs. The teachers drew on past learnings from their ITE program, committed to future-oriented innovations in teaching, and made in-the-present decisions about actions to resolve emergent contingencies such as resource shortages. We argue that these understandings are usefully enhanced by recognising contingency, consciousness, criticality and creativity as additional features of the teachers' deliberative programs of action.

Keywords: agency, Early Career Teachers, disadvantage, poverty, social action, teacher agency, temporally embedded social engagement

Introduction

Teachers' agency is attracting attention in policy and research as a means of bringing new understandings to efforts to improve quality in education across all sectors and settings. Teacher agency is associated with teachers' conscious actions to instigate change in their classrooms, both for the benefit of their students and their own professional experiences. It often co-occurs in the research literature with concepts such as self-determination and self-efficacy (e.g. Keogh et al., 2012), teacher judgement and decision-making (e.g. Hamid et al., 2014), and teachers' beliefs (e.g. Biesta et al., 2015). Biesta et al. (2015) note that in the United Kingdom and elsewhere the shift to teacher agency comes after decades of policies

seeking to deprofessionalise teachers through the imposition of prescriptive curricula and inspection regimes. Agency is now being seen as a core component of teacher professionalism and an acknowledgement that teachers can contribute to their own professional practices and outcomes (Biesta et al., 2015).

The developments in policy directions might offer optimism for the possibilities available to teachers but Biesta et al. (2015) offer a word of caution, asking what possibilities for action teachers actually have in the current era of educational measurement and standardisation. For example, Biesta et al (2015) found in a study of Scottish teachers' beliefs that the new policies are forcing teachers into a type of practice that is characterised by short-termism and little capacity to consider the long-term purposes of education, including priorities around social justice and democratic values. The authors argue that current investigations of teacher agency can justifiably focus on teachers' beliefs but must also consider the policy and institutional environments, including teacher education and its responsibility to present intellectual engagement with the relationships between society, school and teaching (Biesta et al., 2015).

In Australia, teachers' professional qualities and capabilities are embedded in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017). Across the four teacher standards of Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead, the policy guides teachers on areas of teaching and learning, content and curriculum development, differentiation and cross-cultural sensitivities, assessment, and professional development (AITSL, 2017). Teacher agency as such is not mentioned, although Lead teachers are urged to work ethically, and lead and initiate opportunities for engagement with students as well as their parents/ carers and communities. There is explicit reference to working respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds (AITSL, 2017). With the exception of some exemplars, little assistance is provided to teachers on how to achieve the standards.

Irrespective of the policy initiatives, the research shows that even prior to COVID and the subsequent escalation of teaching shortages, settings of hyper-diversity and socio-economic disadvantage often posed difficulties in recruiting and retaining quality teachers. In Australia, a study of teacher education effectiveness with 5000 beginning teachers found that most felt unprepared and ineffective in their teaching of students from diverse cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Mayer et al., 2015). A key feature of socioeconomic disadvantage is its intersectionality with other social, health and environmental factors. For example, in case studies from Australia, Spain and the United States Lampert et al. (2020) found that socioeconomic hardship and poverty are often interrelated with geographical location and limited access to social services and resources. These authors argue that quality teaching involves being able to respond to such contextual conditions, but are clear that quality should not be seen simply as personal attribute of individual teachers. Rather, it is often the "transformative agency of teachers, families, and communities" which is central to quality educational experiences of students systemically under-served in poverty settings (Lampert et al., p. 72).

We introduce three Early Career Teachers (ECTs) who were graduates of a teacher education program designed to prepare high-performing pre-service teachers for teaching in high poverty Australian schools. The program was the Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (ETDS) program which was established in 2009 in a Bachelor of Education program at Queensland University of Technology and later expanded into the National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS)[1] program across eight

[1] The NETDS program has been preparing pre-service teachers since 2010.

Australian universities. Within the NETDS program, third-year students are invited to participate based initially on their Grade Point Average (GPA). Once selected, they continue their studies with a modified curriculum that engages with theories of poverty and social justice, and provides assistance during the students' practicums in high poverty areas (Burnett & Lampert, 2011). The aim of the program is to prepare teachers to be caring and supportive of students while also ensuring "academic excellence in (the teachers') content areas" (p. 449). Most significantly, the program is designed for teachers to understand the historical and systemic injustices that produce poverty and disadvantage in society, and to critically reflect on their role in creating opportunities for more equitable student outcomes in high-poverty schools.

The three ECTs began teaching in schools characterised by combinations of high student cultural and linguistic diversity, remoteness, and poverty: a remote community in Far-North Queensland, a high-density urban fringe suburb, and a small rural town in western Queensland. For many beginning teachers such settings are personally unfamiliar and their preference is to work in middle-class, urban settings (Mayer et al., 2015; Sleeter, 2008). The ECTs in the study are of interest because they were in their first three to five years of teaching and transitional between their initial teacher education program and teaching practice, with their pre-service experiences still influencing their initial repertoires of pedagogical knowledge, understandings and skills (Bettini & Yujeong, 2021).

This study brings together the beliefs and actions of the beginning teachers grounded in social justice principles and practices, and examines them through the lens of agency and teacher agency. The aim is to discern the characteristics of the ECTs' agency as deployed in the service of socially-just educational outcomes for their students. In short, the questions guiding the study reported here are:

- What are the influences and conditions that provoke teachers to actively commit to changing the circumstances of their students' lives?
- What decisions and deliberative actions do teachers take in the service of change to maximise their students' engagement and learning?
- What are the perceived outcomes of their actions?

The paper has five parts: (i) a review of literature on poverty and disadvantage in Australia; (ii) theories of agency and how they apply to teachers; (iii) details of the study; (iv) findings on the experiences of three ECTs; and (v) a discussion about the conditions, decision-making and actions that account for beginning teacher agency dedicated to social justice outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Poverty and Disadvantage in Australia

In Australia the terms 'disadvantage' and 'poverty' are often used interchangeably but are embedded in different although related bodies of literature. In the development of the ETDS and NETDS programs, Burnett and Lampert (2011) initially used the term 'disadvantaged' to align with language in Australian educational institutions and to foreground the relationship between low socioeconomic status and poor educational outcomes. Many educators, including teachers and principals are uncomfortable with the word 'disadvantage', finding it stigmatizing and unproductive because of its focus on deficits (Lampert et al., in press). For instance, school leaders know that working in a school known as disadvantaged affects the morale of students and teachers; furthermore, such a reputation also affects school enrolments because middle-class parents choose to send their children to schools without this stigma. Students labelled as disadvantaged find the stereotype a significant barrier to their achievement (Fuligni, 2007). Young people in so-called

disadvantaged schools know that is their label, as do their families, and both often experience stigma and shame associated with being called disadvantaged (Thompson & Mentor, 2017, p. 33).

However, discourses of disadvantage are still regularly used, sometimes ubiquitously, both in educational policy and by educators. Though school leaders often see it as derogatory, the term 'disadvantage' continues to appear in policy, even when other words or terminology are claimed as preferred. Clearly, 'disadvantage' is a hard word to replace without resorting to euphemism and generic word substitutes. Calling a school 'diverse', 'challenging', 'high poverty' or even 'hard to staff' can obscure the historical disadvantage that more aptly sums up the experiences of vulnerable young people and their families. We use the term 'disadvantage' in this paper for two important reasons. First, not to name disadvantage can make actual disadvantage invisible, something nobody desires. Second, since disadvantage is still the most common term used by government, it is a useful, even crucial term to use in order to leverage much needed support for the young people who are most disadvantaged in schooling.

With regards to the term 'poverty', Lampert et al. (2020) argue that 'poverty' is best conceptualised as 'poverties' that extend beyond income to homelessness, social disruption in families, poor physical and mental health, reduced lifespans, few human rights, and a sense of powerlessness. The intersectionality between these multiple factors means that schools in high poverty settings need to be understood as more complex with a greater array of challenges than schools in other settings (Lupton & Thrupp, 2013).

Poverty statistics in Australia vary depending on the measures being used but according to the census-informed *Poverty in Australia 2020* report for 2017-2018 (ACOSS & UNSW Sydney, 2020) there were 3.24 million Australians – or 13.6% – living below the 50% of median income poverty line. Of these, 774,000 were children. ACOSS (2020) makes the point that the situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the number of people needing unemployment benefits doubling in March 2020 to1.6 million – from 800,000 in October 2019.

The significance of children in poverty is recognised in government policy. For example, in a discussion of future directions for Queensland government schools, Moran (2010) argued that across the next decade child poverty would be an ongoing priority to address because poor children can enter schooling without the breadth of social and cultural experience needed for school-based learning. In addition, poor children can experience "a negative bias against them in curriculum and teaching practices" (p. 12). The study presented here and the actions of the respective teachers are an attempt to foreground the measures that teachers can take to mitigate students' disadvantage and enhance their students' engagement and learning at school.

Theorising Teacher Agency

Foundational work on teacher agency is Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecological model of agency. Similar to Biesta et al.'s (2015) later work presented above, the ecological approach recognises agency as strategically utilising the physical, personal and temporal resources available in a given context. Biesta and Tedder (2007) reject the notion that agency is something that someone *has*; rather, they see it as something that someone *does*. Agency needs to be understood as an emergent phenomenon in the transaction between the individual and the contextualised situation (Biesta et al., 2015): "the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural 'factors' as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique

situations" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

Biesta and Tedder's (2007) conceptualisation of teacher agency draws extensively on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) theorisation of agency, *per se*, which sees agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement which enables "actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (p. 971). Emirbayer and Mische's contribution is to describe the pragmatics of agency, that is, its individual accomplishment within the enabling and constraining contexts of action. For them, human agency is conducted in social situations and is "informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)" (p. 963).

They call these temporal dimensions *iterative* (past); *projective* (future) and *practical-evaluative* (present). The *iterative dimension* of human agency recognises the reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action that align with stablised identities; the *projective dimension* refers to the "imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action", while *the practical-evaluative dimension* involves the actors making "practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations" (p. 971). These temporal dimensions are in constant interplay and account for the "varying degrees of maneuverability, inventiveness, and reflective choice shown by social actors in relation to the constraining and enabling contexts of action" (p. 964).

The temporal-relational view of agency and its adaptation to understandings of teacher agency are useful for interpreting the experiences of the Early Career Teachers as they seek to recognise and 'recompose' the features and resources of their initial teaching positions. Biesta and Tedder (2007) note that autobiographical accounts are useful avenues for personal reflection and evaluation of where and when contextual factors support or constrain agency and the capacity of people – in this case, beginning teachers – to effect social justice-oriented individual and institutional change.

Arguments have been made about the possibilities generated by linking teacher agency and social justice (e.g. Keddie, 2012; Pantic, 2017). For Pantic (2017), teachers' expressions of agency for social justice feature purpose, competence, autonomy and reflexivity within a school's sociocultural context. A key function is helping students to adapt to institutional structures. Within Keddie's (2012) conceptualisation, teacher agency involves teachers advancing students' voices, critiquing privileged forms of knowledge, and redistributing resources to enable traditionally disadvantaged students achieve academically. However, Biesta et al. (2015) found in their UK research that there are in fact, few opportunities within current schooling systems for systematic sense-making about teacher agency and social justice. They argue that the challenge is to identify through research the ways in which agentic teachers are accomplishing socially-just outcomes in their classrooms. It is through biographical methodologies and reflections that research participants can "gain an understanding of the composition of their agentic orientations and how they have played out in their lives so far" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 145).

Research Design and Methodology

The three case studies reported here were part of a larger longitudinal investigation of a teacher cohort learning to teach in high poverty locations. The contested notion of 'quality teaching' within low SES contexts was examined through analysing data collected from key stakeholders, including Early Career Teachers (NETDS graduates), school principals, teacher

and departmental mentors. This article draws on the teachers' autobiographical reflections in interviews that were augmented by workshadowing in the classroom. As noted above, reflections presented in accounts such as interviews offer a research participant's understanding of their agentic actions and orientations. Workshadowing was a way to get a sense of a 'day in the life' of the participating teachers (Cohen, 2017) where we documented and analysed teachers' daily work and how they reflected on this work. The teachers were invited to tell their teaching stories and identify key events and practices they believed constituted their daily work. They were also invited to interpret their practice through narrative and the introspective platform of telling and retelling lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It should be noted that this paper only reports on a single slice of the data collected during workshadowing and focuses on the retelling, reinterpreting and reconstructing of teachers' voice in order to privilege the participants' direct experience in schools.

The three ECTs – Pat, Peter and Harriet – were part of a cohort of 17 NETDS graduates and are introduced in Table 1 below. The description of their schools utilises the Australian government Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA).

	Teacher 1[2]	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
Name	Pat	Peter	Harriet
Level of schooling	Secondary: Middle years	Secondary	Primary
Location	Remote	Urban fringe	Rural
Socioeconomic features of the school	Low SES ICSEA[3] value: 870	Low SES ICSEA value: 870	Low SES ICSEA value: 870
Demographic features of the school	92% Language background other than English & 95% Indigenous students	66% Language background other than English & 12% Indigenous students	3% Language background other than English & 18% Indigenous students

Table 1: Teachers with socioeconomic and demographic details of the schools

The data were part of a larger research project[4] that traced the operation of quality teaching discourses in the everyday practices of ECTs in high poverty Australian schools. Here we narrow the focus to the experiences of the three ECTs and their school contexts which featured complex intersections between diversity, disadvantage and poverty. The teachers' reflections and responses to the workshadow observations are presented in tracts of transcript in an effort to 'hear' their voices about the decisions and priorities driving their actions. Using the lens of teacher agency to analyse and interpret the data, we can discern the contextual and temporal conditions that the beginning teachers attributed to the enabling and constraining of their actions in response to their students' needs.

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[2] Teachers' names are anonymised.

[3] *The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage* (ICSEA) is a scale to measure the levels of educational advantage in Australian schools (1000 being the mean value).

[4] Aspects of the research in this paper were supported under the Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme (Project Number LP140100613 – QUT Ethics approval number 1400001004. Queensland Department of Education and Training Ethics approval number 550/27/1588. Support was also provided by the Origin Foundation, Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation and the Eureka Benevolent Foundation.

Pat: A Remote Indigenous School

Pat graduated from the NETDS program with a Bachelor of Education (Secondary) majoring in Home Economics and Mathematics. She was awarded first class honours. As her first appointment, Pat was offered a position at a remote[5] government school and 18 months later, was still teaching at the school.

The isolation of the community was significant. For instance, the small inaccessible township had only a few stores with no large supermarket. Residents ordered much of their food from the closest regional town (400 kilometres away) with the order delivered by ferry. Like other remote schools in Australia, the school community included large numbers of Indigenous students. Pat's foundational view was that good teaching was based on a positive relationship between herself as teacher and the students. For her, this relationship was at the core of her planning and interactions in class. While most teachers agree on the significance of teacher/student relationships to their work (Wubbles et. al., 2021), Pat had been introduced to the critical concept of relationality in her course in the context of Indigenous epistemological worldviews (Bishop et al., 2021). For Pat, positive relationships were more than interpersonal, and crucial to her sense of herself as a teacher who could influence social change.

What Happened in the Classroom

The research team workshadowed one of Pat's Year 9 Maths classes during which she taught a lesson about plotting Cartesian co-ordinates on a plane. She began by playing a rap music video about the concept to the class. The students were observed to be highly engaged with the film clip: "the whole class…is watching the video – nobody is looking out the window – all 10 students are bouncing around, rocking back and forth to the beat of the song" (Workshadow fieldnotes of Pat's class). The film clip was followed by a game where Pat asked pairs of students to map co-ordinates on the whiteboard according to a scenario. Each scenario was rewarded points. For example, "You respond to a capsized boat and rescue all the people—collect 5 points" or "You go swimming at the Landing—lose 3 points".

Several boys laughed and protested at the latter scenario. "But why, Miss? We all swim at the Landing! What's wrong with that?" Pat replied, "Don't be silly. There are crocodiles there!" "But, Miss, if all you do is swim in the shallow part, it's fine!"
The exchange was spontaneous and relaxed. The class appeared to respond better to the game as they increasingly understood the rules and there was a lot of banter and jokes about deciding the winner.

Teacher's Account of Actions

Pat explained that her decision-making for the lesson prioritised developing scenarios related to the students' community. The previous week she had tried to teach the same concepts using the game *Battleships*, often used in Maths classes to explain co-ordinates. The game had failed to resonate with the students so she had re-evaluated her approach and made the decision to incorporate local sites that were familiar to the students. In her first interview, Pat indicated that a recurring problem with the standardised curriculum documents was that they did not provide scenarios which were relevant to her students' lives in remote northern

[5] The size of the community, its distance from a major population centre and the community's access to a range of government services (e.g., health) are used to define the community/school as urban/metropolitan, rural, regional or remote.

Australia, with its particularities of wildlife, topography, and strong Indigenous culture. For example:

> *Imagine teaching how the earth, moon and tides are to a bunch of Island kids that have lived on the water their whole life? You look at the…curriculum and it's irrelevant because the tides don't do that up here. There's three oceans and currents that you look at. Not like down (in the south of the state) on the coast…It's completely different. So you have to go out there, find out and learn.*

She acknowledged that this situation had led her to re-evaluate her teaching approach and to realise she needed to learn from the students as well as their families and Elders. For example, on one occasion when the curriculum required students to analyse artefacts, she discovered that gender-related cultural protocols existed and that some girls were not allowed to touch particular artefacts. Pat recognised the need to address the cultural protocol in her planning and indicated a willingness to change for the sake of her students' engagement and learning: "I've got to let them teach me".

Pat justified her choice of a rap video on the basis that music had worked previously as a means of reinforcing students' understanding of a concept. She nominated the language barrier between her and the students as a challenge she wanted to overcome. The students in her class generally only spoke English at school. At home the mostly used creole, or Kriol[6]. The students were recognised as using Standard Australian English (SAE) as an additional language or dialect of English (EAL/D) (Queensland Government, 2018). Pat noted:

> *(The students) are supposed to speak only English in the classroom, and I'm supposed to speak only English to them. But sometimes … everyone knows that you learn better in your mother tongue. So sometimes I'll throw creole words out there, just to get their attention.*

She was constantly learning to communicate with the students in creole, using opportunities on playground duty to ask students what words mean. She commented that she was comfortable having the students correct her and laughing when she pronounced a word incorrectly in class. For her, one of the outcomes of her teaching approach was an increased sense of social connection and communication between herself and the students.

A teaching challenge for Pat was the low academic attainment-to-age level of the students. Indeed, the co-ordinates maths game described above was born out of her decision to approach the school principal for permission to raise the content level of her Grade 9 maths class to Grade 9 level, that is, above the Grade 8 level currently being taught. Her request was granted on the proviso that she undertake to "start my scaffolding really low" because of the low literacy and numeracy levels of many of the students. Despite these difficulties and when she was having "a tough day", Pat noted that her sustaining belief was "social justice, that these kids deserve it, … they deserve to have a teacher that knows the curriculum and what they're doing".

Peter: An Urban Multicultural and Multilingual School

Peter was a mature age student during his Initial Teacher Education course having worked previously in hospitality management and tourism. He had been working for 12 years before deciding to study teaching. He graduated from the NETDS program with a Bachelor of Education (Secondary) majoring in Physical Education and Mathematics. He was awarded first class honours. His first teaching contract was in a highly culturally- and

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[6] English-lexified creoles (Kriols) are the first language of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with Standard Australian English (SAE) either an additional dialect of English or a different language for students at school (Kettle & Macqueen, 2020).

linguistically-diverse high school on the suburban fringe of an urban centre; within the year he had been offered a permanent position at the school. Two years later Peter was still teaching at the school where the majority of students were from Vietnam and the Pacific Islands[7] to the east of Australia. During visits to the school, the researchers noted a modern, well-appointed school with a high level of security for the administration building. A police liaison officer was permanently assigned to the school and tasked with following up absent and truanting students, as well as supporting students and families in their relationships with the police.

What Happened in the Classroom

Peter reflected in the research interview that he considered a good teacher to be someone who "gives a damn" and wants to be involved in the lives of the students; in other words, someone who is "willing and wants to be here (in the community)". In the study he was workshadowed during three events: a Year 9 assembly, a Year 11 Maths class where the students were learning about finance, and a Year 8 Maths class about the measurement of parts of a circle such as the circumference. In both Maths classes, Peter actively related concepts to the students' lives. For example, in the Year 11 class on Comparing Deals, he asked one of the girls about the last thing that she had bought at a shop. She answered that it was two boxes of popcorn and two drinks at the movies and that it cost $18. The class conversation continued about prices and how much the same items would have cost at the supermarket. The difference was considered to be approximately $9. Peter then introduced a task in which the students had to calculate how much money someone would spend over the course of a week/year/lifetime (40 years) buying two boxes of popcorn and drinks from the cinema compared to the supermarket. The students used calculators to solve the problem of paying $18 per week and losing $9.00 each time.

The task was lengthy and the students took time to understand the calculation process. They asked lots of questions and Peter responded in numerous ways: he gave his calculator to a student who did not have one; he squatted down beside individual students to address their particular questions; and he used jokes and laughter to keep the atmosphere relaxed. The jokes were often at his own expense, for example, when students in the Year 8 class enjoyed pointing out a spelling mistake in one of his PowerPoint slides. He made frequent use of games and riddles, especially with the Year 8 class which was timetabled in the afternoon when some students appeared tired and lethargic. Peter's classroom talk was often cajoling and encouraging, trying to get the students to complete the task at hand. One of his key concerns was ensuring that the students were prepared for an upcoming test: "Ok guys, the reason we did that; yes, it's Monday and, yes, it's the last lesson, but if we wasted every Monday lesson, we are not going to be prepared for the test". He often referred to the time, offering incentives to the students to get the task done: "Do these four and we are done. 19 minutes to go".

Peter's encouragement was augmented by a firmness around disruptive behaviour. When three boys in the afternoon class constantly joked among themselves and began distracting other students, Peter halted the class until everyone had re-engaged with the task. He requested that the three boys stay behind after the other students had left and rebuked them on their behaviour; to underline his point, he issued them with lunchtime detention for the following day. However, he framed his concerns in terms of frustration about their academic progress: "All three of you are ending up having marks nowhere near where you

[7] Pasifika migrants, that is, people from Polynesia and Oceania including New Zealand Māori and Samoans, are a rising population in Australia, increasing from 0.56% of the population in 2006 to 0.88% in 2016 (Bately, 2017).

could be". He explained to them that they could potentially fail the year and have to repeat Year 8. The students seemed concerned and listened to what he was saying. He concluded by telling them to put all the classroom chairs up on the desks to help the cleaners.

Teacher's Account of Actions

When asked about his approach to teaching, Peter indicated that he was mindful of power in the teacher-student relationship, and how privileged he had been to have opportunities in his own schooling. When he reflected on his decision-making, he said that focusing his lesson on deals for treat food and mobile phones enabled him to work with content that was relevant to the students' lives outside of school. He was keen for them to make sound financial decisions. He referenced power when he explained his decision to work with students individually:

> *… there seems to be a lot of resistance to that power structure of you standing up and telling them. I just have found that you stand up high and they're sitting down low, that power structure is still there. Whilst you want them to know you're the teacher and they're the student, you want them to also think okay, he's willing to come and forgo the other 22 people in this class and just talk to me right now.*

Peter was also aware that poverty factors such as a lack of sleep and poor nutrition were affecting some students and their attention in class. He responded by matching the focus of his class with the time of the day:

> *…when it comes to the nutrition of a lot of the students, it's poor. It's really poor. So they run around like crazy during lunchtime. They use up all their energy. They get to period four and they're just shot. The only thing keeping them going is the fact that they've had a sugar spike at lunch from a Zooper Dooper (a frozen iceblock) or a can of Coke or some chocolate or something like that. So they very much spike up and down. So … for the second lesson today, my goal wasn't to get through the entire PowerPoint.*

For him, the community had suffered a history of deficit narratives and he noted the impact these had on the students' beliefs about their efficacy as students:

> *This school has a reputation from years ago of being a rough school and being a problem school but I don't see any of it. I think what characterises this school mostly is the multiculturalism of it. It's a real melting pot of everything. The students are a real melting pot as well of disadvantage that have just been told time and time and time again that they just can't do it and they've gotten to the point where they believe it.*

Despite these deficit discourses and his view of their powerful effects, Peter expressed optimism about the potential of his students to achieve at school, and intentionally and explicitly referenced the literature on high expectations which had been presented to him in reflective reading groups he had participated in as part of his course (Sarra et. al., 2020). His hope was that through supporting experiences of academic learning and success, irrespective of how small, the students would be resourced to create change in their lives and community beyond his classes:

> *I think my big passion is I want them to change; rather than just be comfortable with going to school, finishing school, go on [social security payments]. I want them to change that. I'd love to see in a generation's time [this] being a thriving community that has a real pride in itself.*

Harriet: A Small Rural School

Harriet attended low SES schools for both her primary and high school education. She graduated from the NETDS program with a Bachelor of Education (Primary) and was immediately offered a teaching position in a small rural school in the south-west of Queensland. Her class at the time of the research was a composite Year 5/6 class. The rural[8] school was observed to be well-resourced in terms of large-scale infrastructure with buildings and facilities sponsored by an energy company, the major employer in the local area. Despite the presence of the energy industry, many of the parents and caregivers of the students were either under-employed or unemployed. People with reliable incomes often sent their children to boarding schools where they were thought to have more opportunities.

Despite the outward appearance of the school, it was evident from Harriet's accounts that many of the students were living in some degree of poverty; for some students, extreme poverty. Moreover, while the large-scale school facilities were impressive looking, the day-to-day resources needed for classroom activities were limited and teachers felt constantly under-resourced. For teachers such as Harriet, the shortfall was "beefed up" using her own money. During workshadowing for the project, researchers observed Harriet teaching physical education, reading and history. The observation notes point to a dynamic and friendly classroom environment with the lessons carefully-structured and fast-paced.

What Happened in the Classroom

An observation of Harriet's classroom was the care she gave to making the room attractive through the use of learning resources that were bright and attractive. Her classroom interactions with students were warm and respectful; routines and objectives were explicit and familiar to the students. During the workshadowing, one female student hugged Harriet affectionately. Harriet regularly gave positive feedback that was audible to the whole class: "Well done for being a learner". She also used incentives to reward and encourage students; for example, she gave out stars for a star chart when her students lined up quietly. Multiple stars were put towards an ice-cream or tickets to a movie night. Stars were also awarded for working well on assessment tasks.

During the class one boy was observed to be holding a football and another student asked to use "the fiddly things" which were soft, malleable sticks that students could hold and bend to help them stay focused. Harriet had recently travelled to the state capital Brisbane and in class told stories of the city; she also distributed gifts that she had bought to share with the students. In the History class Harriet introduced the topic of women's right to vote and demonstrated to the students how to take notes. She encouraged students' questions and kept the topic focussed with clear directions and friendly interactions.

Teacher's Account of Actions

When asked about her teaching at the school, Harriet referred to the need to purchase resources for her classes using her own money; she said that many of the other teachers were doing the same thing:

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[8] Rural/remote areas are defined as communities with less than 1000 persons (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2002).

So the past financial year I spent just under $5,000…of my own money. I feel like it's necessary because I won't have things [for the classroom] if I don't do it.

Harriet was acutely aware of the poverty and levels of disadvantage among her students. The students' lack of resources at home was what motivated her and her colleagues to spend their own money on supplementing the meagre supplies at the school. The physical deprivations of some of the students were at the forefront of her decision-making:

I've got students who live in sheds with no water or electricity and they barely get any food. I've got a couple of kids who…might see food once a week…So I've got ones that go hungry all the time…At lunch time if they don't have a lunch they can go…to the tuckshop and [it] will actually make them lunch and they'll invoice the parents later. But for one particular student…if that happens, she's too scared about it because she gets in a lot of trouble if she takes that invoice home. So she chooses not to eat.

Harriet also explained that while the school provided a breakfast club, the students who needed it rarely used it.

In the face of learning material shortages, she and her colleagues decided to work collaboratively and pool resources such as worksheets and lesson plans. For Harriet this collaboration was more than collegiality; it was the means to provide her students with opportunities that they might otherwise have missed:

So one term I would make the English, History, Science and (my colleague) would…make the tech, the design and stuff like that and we would switch. That was a big thing last year. This year it's just the little things, like we might share a worksheet.

She was sensitive to her students' often complex needs. For example, when discussing the student – Andrew – playing with the football in class, she described him as a very angry student who was selective in whom he listened to. She had taught him for two years and had developed a clearer understanding of him as a person:

When it comes to Andrew, because I've worked out with him, so if he comes up and - like I said, last week he came in and threw a desk because he was just so angry. He threw his desk, no one else's, and he came back and he picked it up and then he stormed out. When it comes to Andrew, we've worked out a system where he knows where he can go to calm down and he comes back and then we have a chat about what happened and then he has to make up the time.

In an effort to care for Andrew, Harriet took time each week to meet with his mother. She also sought advice and assistance from the school administration and fellow teachers.

She described her attempts to integrate herself into the local community, especially in the extra-curricular activities of her students. In the rural western town where she was living, community involvement meant sporting and cultural activities, and events such as camel races:

I go to the boys' games and they love seeing me there. Throughout the week it's like "oh I remember the football"; they're like "oh we saw you there, Miss". ... I go to the kids' dance performances and we go to the camel races and they come up to you because they want to see that you're taking an interest in their life, because a lot of the time that interest doesn't always happen in other aspects (of their lives).

Harriet was mindful of the community and the skills that the students needed both for schooling and life in the post-school period. Echoing the concerns of Moran (2010), she reflected on the challenges for her students, not only poverty and its grave consequences but also a lack of foundational knowledge about power and how it works. She articulated a clear

set of goals – for herself as teacher and her students:

> *My overall goal is to make (the students) workable citizens. That's what I want because some of these kids need a lot of help to get there… I want them to be able to have resilience, I want them to be able to problem-solve and communicate because, again, that's three things that a lot of these kids lack big time. I want them to be able to find answers for things, but I also want them to have your basic knowledge of important things. So I want them to be able to look critically at something; I want them to be able to know basic maths in their head; I want them to be able to understand scientific things around the world because…it's hard to live in society if you don't have at least a basic level of knowledge of what's going on around you.*

Harriet's reflections present a list of concerns for her students and their capacity to be resilient and 'productive' (or employable and critical) citizens in contemporary society. While Harriet, influenced by common popular educational discourses, refers rather uncomfortably to what students' 'lack' and defaults to references to resilience, problem-solving and communication, her underlying concerns appear mitigated by the goal to assist her students overcome disadvantage and acquire the attributes she deems necessary to be successful in post-school life.

Discussion

In terms of research on contextual responsiveness, Heimans and Singh (2020) argue that researchers working with participants in high-poverty contexts must always consider those "for whom such work is being undertaken" (p. 9). This study foregrounded early career teachers' agency and investigated their beliefs and actions in generating socially-orientated change for their students in contexts of high poverty and disadvantage. The disadvantage was marked by factors such as geographical remoteness, curricula dissonance with local culture, social isolation and discourses of dejection, as well as economic and physical hardship. Teacher agency is recognised as the extent of change that a teacher achieves within the affordances and constraints of the context, which includes institutional conditions and individual resources (e.g. Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015). Agentic action involves mobilising prior patterns of thought and action to imagine innovative and future-oriented 'trajectories of action' in order to address the pressing dilemmas and problems in the current situation (e.g. Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

For the beginning teachers in the study, their initial teacher education experiences formed an influential, past-oriented reference point for their decision-making about the resources to bring to bear on their new experience of teaching in a school with disadvantaged students. They were able to articulate concerns as they identified them in their respective contexts and committed to seeking potential resolutions and change. Each teacher also indicated a *practical-evaluative dimension* to their decision-making (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) by recognising the need for actions to be practical responses to the "demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities" of the presently-evolving situation (p. 971). It was evident in the teachers' accounts that these past, future and present dimensions were in play as they sought to negotiate the constraints and affordances in their respective teaching contexts.

For Pat at a remote school in far northern Australia, deliberative actions included explicit recognition of Indigenous culture and community practices, and inclusion of local language and landmarks in her learning tasks. Peter's actions in a culturally and linguistically diverse school on the fringe of a large city comprised the deliberate subversion of perceived

power imbalances between himself and the students, even to the extent of consciously squatting beside individual students to help them complete tasks. In addition, he was overt in his statements of care and concern for the students, and his high expectations and belief in their capacity to do better. For Harriet in a poor, rural school, the priority in her actions was supplementing materials and providing personalised treats for her students who had very few resources at home – even if it meant using her personal funds.

The teachers' autonomous actions, independent of institutional mandates and indeed, in spite of them, can be understood through the lens of teacher agency, where they were taking action that was possible within the limits of their professional experience and access to resources. The extent of the change is difficult to gauge here but their efforts point to an interest in action that promotes social justice for their students through cultural recognition, social legitimation, and resource redistribution. We argue that additional qualities are revealed in the analyses which can contribute to new understandings of beginning teacher agency and social justice. We have defined these qualities as the capacity to act *contingently*, *consciously*, *critically* and *creatively.*

First, the teachers are able to act *contingently*, that is, they initiate responses to the students' circumstances irrespective of the particularities. While a teacher's ideal role might be to produce good, "hard-working, self-regulating, socially responsible" students (Comber, 1998, p. 20), the teachers in this study demonstrated flexibility and openness to addressing the students' needs and behaviours in whatever form they presented themselves. Irrespective of their social justice-oriented training, the particulars of the students' disadvantage remained unfamiliar and unforeseen to the teachers but they were willing to respond to the immediacy of the problems with the resources – cultural, social, material – they had at their disposal. And while they questioned the impact of their efforts at times, the teachers' willingness to disrupt mainstream classroom and curricula norms in the service of their students made change possible, no matter how small, thus reconfiguring – even slightly – the power imbalances and student experiences at the schools.

Second, the analyses indicate that the teachers are engaging *consciously* with their students; that is, there is a self-awareness about the need to shift their teacher identities to be more in alignment with the values and interests of the students and their communities. The teachers are explicit in their need to 'move to the students' and they exhibit a willingness to acculturate to the context-specific practices of their students – a meeting half-way, culturally, socially and linguistically.

Third, the teachers' accounts and actions demonstrate a capability to work *critically* to interrogate existing curricula and materials for relevance and to reformulate them *creatively* to resonate with their students' foundational knowledge, while also prioritising learning outcomes and academic standards. The agency demonstrated by the teachers presupposes student ability, and their subsequent actions provide continuous and unstinting efforts to provide the learning tasks, materials and activities that they believe generate engagement and achievement. We assert that the teachers' conscious, contextually-responsive mobilisation of available resources to promote change for the benefit of the students is a mark of teacher agency and a feature of good teaching.

Conclusion

This paper has foregrounded teacher agency in historically disadvantaged contexts, proposing contingency, consciousness, criticality and creativity as additional dimensions to conceptualising teachers' social actions as they respond to their students' needs. We recognise that the early career teachers introduced here are located in the contexts of their

specific schools, and that this study is not presenting macro-level structural change to ameliorate disadvantage more broadly. Indeed, we note the cautions of Heimans and Singh (2020) that education alone does not guarantee a pathway out of poverty and Connell's (2009) point that the teachers may at some point feel overwhelmed by the belief that they are the only ones between their students and poverty. This research was conducted prior to COVID, so we stress that time and place are central to the practices evidenced in the workshadowing undertaken in the study. Inequities have become even greater since 2020, exacerbated by acute teacher shortages. Indeed, recognition of teaching practices as taking place within the social, economic and political contexts of time and place needs to be an essential part of any discussion about the current pressing problem of retaining quality teachers in hard-to-staff schools (Burnett & Lampert, 2011; Lampert et al., 2020).

This study offered the beginning teachers the opportunity to articulate their agentic orientations and actions within the affordances and constraints of their initial teaching post. We note that the teachers were influenced not just by their initial teacher education but by their own life experiences and the contextual constraints of the setting in which they were teaching. It is no great surprise that sometimes teachers default to deficit views or find it hard to express or hang onto their strongest social justice principles. The study itself not only enabled the teachers to tell important stories and share their practice; it also provided them with opportunities to critically and consciously identify the components of their actions that mattered most to them. We recognise that teacher agency and socially-just engagement remain ongoing challenges across careers and in different contexts. Thus, we believe it is beneficial for graduate teachers to draw on reflexive resources and social justice orientations to continually analyse and respond *in situ* to the conditions impacting their classrooms. Their capacities are undoubtedly contingent too on the working contexts in which they are situated, including the ideological and practical repertoires of their colleagues.

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