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Keita Takayama
University of New England, ktakayam@une.edu.au

Tiffany Jones
La Trobe University & University of New England, tiffany.jones@mq.edu.au

Rose Amazan
University of New England, ramazan@une.edu.au

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Thinking with/through the Contradictions of Social Justice in Teacher Education: Self-Reflection on NETDS Experience

Keita Takayama

Rose Amazan

University of New England

Tiffany Jones

La Trobe University & University of New England

Abstract: Improving teacher quality has become the hallmark of Australian education reform with a plethora of measures introduced in teacher education to improve future teachers' instructional competencies. This policy focus has also changed the discussion of strategies for addressing disadvantages in schools; improving teacher quality, as opposed to addressing structural inequalities in the system and larger society, has become the "solution." This paper looks at the National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS), which aims to channel high performing teacher education students to disadvantaged schools. Using the taxonomy of conservative, liberal and critical approaches to education reform, the paper first identifies the ideological contradictions inherent in the program, and then discusses, drawing on post-qualitative research literature, how the program coordinators negotiated the tensions and the moral/ethical dilemmas as we designed and implemented the program for a group of external students at University of New England.

Teacher Quality as the Silver Bullet

Teacher quality/effectiveness has become the central focus of education reform today. As part of this trend, a plethora of reform measures have been introduced to ensure that pre-service teachers are equipped with a high level of content knowledge and pedagogic skills in areas of concern for teachers broadly, including literacy (Beck, Brown, Cockburn & McClure, 2005), mathematics (Baumert, Kunter, Blum, Brunner, Voss, Jordan & Tsai, 2010) and morality/ethics (Jones, 2009; Veugelers, 2000). Likewise, the current policy focus on teacher quality has intensified the attempt to upskill practising teachers through the introduction of professional standards and the extensive provision of professional development opportunities. Across the USA, the UK and Australia there have emerged conceptualisations of the "expert" or "quality" teacher, sometimes termed "highly accomplished teacher" or "advanced skills teacher" depending on context (Goodwyn, Fuller & Francis-Brophy, 2014).

The schemes to improve pre-service teacher quality gained political momentum in Australia when an international benchmarking report showed that Australian teacher education programs drew on lower ranked student pools (mostly those in the bottom half of their university entrant cohort), compared to "best practice" programs in international contexts (mostly drawing on students from the top third) (Ingvarson, Reid, Buckley, Kleinhenz & Masters, 2014). The Australian media gave considerable attention to the quality of university-based teacher education program entrants and the allegedly poor academic

standards of the programs (Federal Politics Editor, 2013; Ferrari, 2014; Smith, 2015). Christopher Pyne, then Federal Minister of Education, established the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) to advise on ‘how teacher education could be improved to better prepare new teachers for the classroom’ (Teaching Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014, p. 1), and TEMAG produced 38 recommendations by June that year. The government quickly acted on the recommendations and introduced a range of reforms to improve pre-service teacher quality: increasing the minimum Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) cut-off point for teacher education awards, requiring a new minimum standard of three Band 5 High School Certificate (HSC) results (including one in English) and the passing of the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students as a necessary condition for the final practicum placement and hence the initial teacher certification (from July 2016).

Central to the rise of narrow policy focus on teacher quality-cum-effectiveness is the extensive research work by John Hattie, Chair of the Board of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (from 2014 onward). His 2009 book *Visible Learning*, which provides a meta-analysis of research on what in-school factors impact student learning outcomes, ‘has become a runaway best seller for an academic text’ in Australia (Thomson, Lingard & Wrigley, 2012, p. 4). Despite Hattie’s (2003) acknowledgement that socio-economic factors (poverty, health and resource disparity), which are beyond the control of schools and teachers, account for much of student performance variance, this qualification is quickly forgotten in his assertion about teacher effectiveness. According to him, the answer to improving student learning outcomes lies in the person who ‘gently closes the classroom door and performs the teaching act—the person who puts into place the end effects of so many policies, who interprets these policies, and who is alone with students during their 15,000 hours of schooling’ (Hattie, 2003, p. 2-3). To Hattie, larger systemic problems such as poverty, wealth inequality and racial segregation are out of our control as educators and hence education system should focus on what is in its control, teaching and learning. Hattie’s work has been enthusiastically endorsed by State Education Departments, schools and media and appropriated to promote a rather simplistic view that teacher practices are the only factor influencing student learning outcomes (Thomson et al., 2012).

Parallel to this narrowing policy focus on teacher quality/effectiveness is the ongoing discussion of widening socio-economic disparities and Indigenous “gap” and the role of education in addressing these entrenched inequalities in education (Keddie, Gowlett, Mills, Monk & Renshaw, 2013). Standardized testing data, such as NAPLAN and OECD’s PISA, consistently point to the persistent educational inequalities faced by Indigenous and other disadvantaged students in Australian schools. The twin focuses of educational excellence and equity in PISA, which has considerably shaped the Australian education policy discourse over the last decade, helped keep social inclusion and educational equity as one of the central policy agenda. Increasingly, however, the policy discussion about educational inequalities has shifted away from the traditional attention to poverty and structural inequalities in education system (e.g., inequitable allocation of resource etc.) towards the quality of teachers who work with disadvantaged children (Thomson et al., 2012).

This shift, which has taken place incrementally over the last several decades, can be most clearly observed by comparing the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) launched in 1974 and terminated in 1997 on the one hand, and the 2009 Council of Australian Governments National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality, signed by many key levels of Government on the other (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Arguably one of the most extensive federal intervention into educational disadvantages in Australian education, DSP was created to raise student achievement and improve educational

outcomes through the role of classroom teachers, the goal of community participation and action research (Connell, Johnston & White, 1991). As Lingard (1998) explains, DSP was premised upon the social-democratic notion of social justice, with its focus on whole school change and improved school-community relations in low socio-economic communities, rather than on fixing-up individual deficit students. This reflected the policy mindset of the time; an explicit acknowledgement of the effect of structural inequity on educational disadvantages and a combination of social justice policy framework with empowerment strategies were worked into DSP (Connell et al., 1991). Though the program was not perfect (see Connell et al., 1991) and its focus shifted over time (Lingard 1998), its explicit acknowledgement of the effect of structural inequalities on schools and student learning outcomes is notable.

By contrast, the National Partnership Agreement ‘aims to deliver system-wide reforms targeting critical points in the teacher “lifecycle” to attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and leaders in our schools and classrooms’ (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 4). It sets out teacher quality as the key strategy for social inclusion, in particular, to address Indigenous disadvantage in education. More specifically, as part of its strategy, the agreement aims to ‘(a)tract top non-education graduates to commit to teaching, especially in hard-to-staff schools’ (p. 9), which echoes the operational concept of *Teach for America* (TFA) and *Teach for Australia* (Ravitch, 2013).¹ The structural inequality in Australian education system, as articulated in DSP, might be part of the education policy discourse today, as most recently observed in the call for a more equitable funding model in the 2011 *Gonski Report*. And yet the report was quickly overshadowed by the current infatuation with teacher quality/effectiveness as the “silver bullet” for achieving overall improvement in educational outcome and narrowing the achievement gap. Hence, as Ravitch (2013) argues in the US context, a policy consensus has emerged that ‘poverty can be overcome by effective teachers’ (p. 91). Similarly, Burnett and Lampert (2011) observe in the context of Australia that ‘the popular sense that better teachers are needed for the children most at risk is now firmly part of a very public discourse...’ (p. 447).

The National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS),² the focus of our discussion, has emerged out of this particular political juncture surrounding teacher quality/effectiveness and the persistent socio-economic and Indigenous disadvantages in Australian education. NETDS, initially developed and implemented at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), recruits top performing education students and prepare them to work in disadvantaged schools. As the program founders at QUT explain, NETDS does not view a commitment to social justice as a prerequisite for preservice teachers when entering the program. Instead, it sees academic achievement as the prerequisite while ‘believing a commitment to social justice’ as:

something that can grow and be enhanced through engagement with a modified curriculum and positive reflected experiences on practicum and or with mentor teachers, and through concentrated engagement with selected theory related to understanding poverty, the dynamics of disadvantage and pragmatic forms of social justice (Burnett & Lampert, 2011, p. 449).

In the second half of 2013 we were invited by the NETDS convenors at QUT to develop and implement the NETDS at our school of education. This was part of the program’s national expansion, funded by the Origin Foundation, the Australia’s major energy

¹ As Ravitch (2013) explains, TFA recruits high-achieving non-education graduates into teaching in disadvantaged schools. It claims that TFA teachers, trained in its five week teacher preparation program, are ‘solely equipped’ to ‘abolish inequality and establish social justice’ (p. 135).

² NETDS was initially called National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools. “Teaching” is now used to replace “Teachers.”

company, and NETDS has been extended to 6 Australian university-based teacher education programs (UNE, University of Newcastle, Deakin University, University of South Australia, Victoria University and Western Sydney University). In 2014, we recruited 20 students, either primary or secondary education students, into our program on the basis of their exceptional academic performance (top 5-10% Grade Point Average (GPA)) over a year or longer, a requirement in line with the QUT model. We required all students to complete a unit that focussed on teaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to complete at least one practicum in a school with a lower Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) rating (under 1000), also in line with the QUT model. In the first year we organised a launch event, a series of workshops focussed on issues around poverty and teaching in disadvantaged schools. In the second year we also included excursion trips to several successful schools rated as low ICSEA to ensure the students could experience first-hand the many different strategies employed by leadership, administrative, and teaching staff to help the disadvantaged students succeed. Over the last three years, our NETDS program has been reviewed and assessed through the quarterly progress reports submitted to the Origin Foundation. The non-negotiable NETDS “deliverables” against which our performance has been assessed are 1) the annual intake of new student cohort (15-20) into the program and 2) the number of those who successfully complete the program and then secure their initial professional appointments in low ICSEA schools.

This article is based on our collective, critical self-reflection on designing and implementing NETDS at UNE over the last three years. More specifically, it begins by identifying some of the tensions and contradictions that are inherent in NETDS and then explores a series of ideological, logistical and moral/ethical issues that we encountered as we designed and implemented the program. To this end, we use the taxonomy of three different ideological approaches—conservative, liberal and critical—to school reform as a heuristic device for our self-reflection. Drawing on post-qualitative methodological literature on autobiography, narrative inquiry and self-reflective practice, our collective self-reflection illuminates how our decisions over the program design and implementation have been shaped partly by our desire to contain a set of ideological tensions in the program, which was further complicated by the logistical decisions we made. In conclusion, we tease out the implications of our NETDS experience for the politics of doing social justice in teacher education in the current policy context.

Three Ideological Approaches

There are a range of different ideological approaches to school reform that focus on different conceptualisations of “the problems” needing to be reformed, and the “best” strategic approaches towards their improvement (Jones, 2007, 2009). Gilbert (2004) argue that any education is a selection from a particular culture, and the values of that culture are central to understanding and participating in it (p.93). Therefore, education generally, and education policy specifically, are valuing processes. Kemmis, Cole & Suggett (1983) propose three education orientations: vocational neo-classical (or conservative), liberal-progressive and socially critical. Each are different valuing processes, based on different beliefs about the aim of education, and aligning with different pedagogical approaches. The three approaches are a heuristic device, not discrete categories, with which to make sense of the underlying assumptions of programs reforming education and teaching. Programs may contain any combination of these different and often conflicting orientations. We view NETDS as one such program drawing upon divergent ideological reform approaches. This necessarily

creates a set of tensions and contradictions that those who actually design and implement the program must think and work through.

Conservative reform approaches strongly reigned prior to the 1960s and still occur today. Within this orientation, schools take an authoritarian approach and inculcate students with the dominant values, beliefs and practices of the time. Students are merely passive recipients of this knowledge and constructed as the “empty vessel” to be filled with knowledge (Bell, 1979). Education policies and programs within this orientation focus on shaping students to fit current social and vocational conventions. Classroom pedagogy is characterised by the undisputed authority of the teacher and the unproblematic transmission of authorised knowledge. Methods include lectures or sermons, streaming of classes (a method used in the NETDS program), or enforcing of behavioural rules and pledges. A key goal is maintaining social stability through protecting the existing interests of dominant groups (Irvine, 2002; Jones, 2013). Programs can be conceived as a problem-solving tools designed to rectify particular issue(s) of concern using top-down model; with the production of sweeping, prescriptive practices from above (Kenyon, 2007), and often positivist education research that aims at solving a problem within schools or society as perceived by the status quo/education leadership through the best policy/best systemised policy into practice translation (Ozga, 2000; Simons, Olssen & Peters, 2009). Reform processes are standardised and their application can be monitored, where a set of targets—or “deliverables” in the case of NETDS—are set to assess the performance of providers. Contextual issues rendering set benchmarks inappropriate may or may not be considered (Gillborn, 2005).

Liberal reform approaches were first popularised in education policy in the 1960s (Jones, 2013; Kemmis et al., 1983), and its rise in the Anglo-American countries has been widely researched (Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000; Youdell, 2004). Within this orientation, schools and teachers act as facilitators for students’ development of knowledge and skills; particularly relating to academic inquiry and personal decision-making (Jones, 2009). The focus is on preparing the whole student for life rather than employment (Kemmis et al., 1983; Youdell, 2004). Classroom pedagogy is characterised by democratic settings where the teacher is positioned as a facilitator and students’ active inquiry is valued. While authority is recognised to some extent, an element of authority here shifts to the individual (e.g. the particular teacher or student) (Bauman, 2005) who makes their own choices within the existing institutional structure. Pedagogic methods include class discussion, writing personal reflections, expression of feelings and opinions, debates and practicing skills. Programs are generally leadership-initiated but also further developed and impacted upon across implementation processes and revision/ adaptation processes by program stakeholders (Giroux, 1993) – a feature seen in the NETDS’s national expansion. Studies, including the evaluative processes of NETDS, may explore variation in site-specific interpretations of a variety of reform approaches to see which produce comparably better outcomes for set standards.

Critical reform approaches emerged in the 1970s as part of wider social struggles for gender, race and class equalities (Kemmis et al., 1983, p. 129). As we saw in the earlier discussion of DSP, whole-school reform approaches are seen as necessary for the inclusion of marginalised social groups. Teachers aim to engage students more actively in social critique and action, and students are ideally empowered to promote alternative principles, question deep-seated social values and unjust practices, and undertake actions to lead to a more equitable society (Jones, 2009). Pedagogic methods include critical analysis, real-world student activism and specific classroom equity reforms. They commonly aspire for students’ awareness of ‘the structural determinants of oppression and social injustice, and the formation of a cohesive political strategy for social change’ (Beckmann, Cooper & Hill, 2009, p. 336). This explicitly critical pedagogic work characterizes the modified curriculum

in NETDS (Lampert, Burnett & Comber, 2013). However, critical approaches also aspire for a comprehensive, system-wide reform of institutions such as universities and schools wherein altering the imbedded repressive power hierarchies is deemed essential for more equitable outcomes (Beckmann et al., 2009). Program processes are bottom-up, with reform advocated for by pressure groups, or specific community members may take some form of (legal or other) action to encourage it (Beckmann et al., 2009). Reforms can be adapted to meet specific community types (Beckmann et al., 2009; Noddings, 1992), and evaluated within critical frames (critical analysis, Marxism, post-colonialism, feminism, gay liberation and so on). Processes ideally involve institution-wide change (Noddings, 2003); not just the implementation of a small program of training around disadvantaged schools which is only delivered for *select* pre-service teachers (e.g., NETDS).

NETDS contains elements of conservative and liberal processes, including key methods of streaming students, working within the usual processes of systems, and the establishment of program “deliverables” against which other NETDS providers are held accountable. However, it also contains socially critical methods and goals, including its application of critical pedagogy work as part of the modified curriculum and its explicit focus on redressing inequitable distribution of teaching workforce. It is thus ideologically contradictory, however it is important to stress that NETDS is not alone in being ideological contradictory. There is no ideological purity in education programs and policies. Ideological eclecticism is part and parcel of the art of politics in social policy (Stone, 2002). In politics of education reform, compromises are made in order to make reform proposals appealing to the widest possible constituencies, hence to enhance political legitimacy. We see NETDS as a strategic attempt to reposition teacher education in the larger scheme of social justice agenda in education. It is thoughtfully positioned within the dominant policy discourse of teacher effectiveness while keeping some of the social justice agenda in education alive. However, this strategic repositioning work has created a set of tensions and contradictions that we as designers and implementers of the program had to negotiate.

Collective Reflection on UNE’s NETDS

Drawing from post-qualitative research literature around auto-biography, narrative writing and reflective practice (Ellis & Bochner 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008), we ground the following collective reflection within our particular contextual experiences of NETDS at UNE. The central focus in our collective reflection is on the ongoing processes of program design and implementation, more precisely how we are making sense of our decisions and their implications in light of the current political juncture surrounding social justice in teacher education today. Much of our collective reflection has been developed over the last three years through ongoing conversation among ourselves and with the NETDS founders at QUT and our students. As suggested by Clandinin and Caine (2008), we believe that narrative writing enables us to make meanings of our NETDS experience through conversation, dialogue and participation in the very program we have designed and implemented. Critical self-reflection of practice from within unique contextual particularities can offer insights that are unique and intimately tailored to the situation. As we were deeply embedded within the context of this process, the usual empiricist separation between the researcher and the researched naturally collapses, and we ourselves become the researched and the researcher simultaneously. Drawing on this post-qualitative onto-epistemic stance, we venture into the dynamic process of collective, critical self-reflection, which can generate hitherto-underexplored views and insights and hence transform our subjectivities, worldviews and practices (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Upon being invited to be part of NETDS back in 2013, we were excited and immediately thought that this was a very astutely designed program in that it was strategically positioned within the dominant education policy discourse in Australia today; in essence NETDS articulates social justice agenda in teacher education within the prevailing conservative policy discourse around teacher effectiveness, the kind of policy discourse underpinning *Teach for America* and *Teach for Australia*. We wholeheartedly shared the sentiment expressed by the NETDS founders that we need to bring back the social justice agenda from *Teach for Australia* and reposition the University-based Schools of Education at the centre of teacher preparation for disadvantaged schools. Like the NETDS founders, we were concerned that many of our quality graduates were not adequately guided to take up initial teaching jobs in disadvantaged schools in the public system and quickly snapped by privileged private schools. In our mind, the goal of NETDS was clearly critical; it aims to address part of the resource inequity issue in Australian education system, where less qualified and less experienced teachers are often assigned to teach most disadvantaged children (Green, 2008). NETDS was designed to address, at least partly, the inequitable distribution of teaching resources by channelling supposedly most capable teachers to disadvantaged schools. The program is also critical in another sense; it is designed to nurture the participants' commitment to social justice through modified curriculum and professional mentorship (Burnett & Lampert, 2011). A range of theoretical, sociologically informed tools are provided through the modified curriculum to help the participants interrupt the reproduction of social inequalities through schooling (Lampert et al., 2013).

However, NETDS uses conservative and liberal means to achieve the critical social goals. Its use of academic achievement as one of the key entry requirements (Burnett & Lampert, 2011) positions NETDS within the conservative or at best liberal paradigm. As discussed earlier, the critical approach to recruitment would actively seek out those who are under-represented in the profession or marginalized by it, including students from low socio-economic, Indigenous, refugee and non-English-speaking backgrounds. This is a crucial point, as teachers from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to stay in the communities from which they come. This is particularly the case with Indigenous education students whose connection to land plays a significant role in their decision of professional placement (Oliver et al., 2013), and this was particularly relevant to our school which enjoys a comparatively high percentage of Indigenous students' enrollment. Furthermore, the targeted recruitment of high performing students on the basis of GPA could potentially compromise the critical goal that NETDS aims to achieve, because it could create inequitable learning experience within the School of Education in which it is placed. Studies in sociology of education have shown how ability grouping reinforces and even widens the existing gap in learning outcomes between those who are deemed exceptional and those who are not (Oakes, 1985).

Indeed, these ideological tensions underpinning NETDS considerably shaped our engagement with the program from the start. Having taught against the use of ability-grouping to our undergraduate education students in our sociology of education units, we felt conflicted about this program requirement and knew that how to circumvent this aspect of the program would pose us a challenge down the road. Indeed, UNE as an institution had been very successful in working with a range of student from various entry options, attracting more teacher education students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds than most other Australian universities. In fact, many of the questions we asked at the week-long orientation of NETDS at QUT focused on this concern. We asked the past and current NETDS participants and the QUT founders how the formation of the selective group might have impacted the dynamics among education students and faculty members at QUT School of Education. While no one confirmed the presence of undesirable consequences of ability

grouping, we were left wondering whether or not a chance to talk to other QUT faculty members and students who were not involved in the NETDS program might have provided different insights.

Recruiting NETDS participants on the basis of GPAs as one of the major, if not the only, selection criteria continued to trouble us even after the week-long orientation, and our conversation at the preparation stage focused on how to contain its potential inequitable consequences. We were aware that the program tacitly accepts the premise of the prevailing conservative discourse on teacher effectiveness, which as a whole could potentially take policy attention and resource away from the systemic and structural nature of the causes of socio-economic disparity in education. With these limitations of the program in mind, however, we still thought that the program was a justifiable intervention born out of the difficult policy context surrounding social justice in teacher education today. We wanted to explore what we could do to design and implement NETDS at UNE in a way to minimize the possible consequences of some of the conservative features of NETDS.

Upon reflection, we can see how the concerns expressed above have shaped our decisions regarding NETDS at UNE and set certain constraints on what we have been able to achieve thus far. We knew from the start that implementing NETDS with our internal students was not going to be an option for us. This was because of the specific institutional features of UNE School of Education; where the students form a very close-knit community, as the majority of them come from the neighbouring New England Region and reside in a handful of residential colleges in the semi-rural setting of Armidale. We did not think that there was any way to implement the NETDS's top 5-10% GPA requirement while obscuring the academically selective nature of the program for our internal students. We were worried about the negative consequences of streaming on those who were deemed less than exceptional and the implicit message that we would be communicating to our students about the value of streaming as a pedagogic strategy. We thought working with external students would be one, albeit never perfect, way to mitigate the possible consequences of ability-grouping. Given that 65-70% of UNE School of Education's initial teacher education program enrolment is off-campus, this focus on external students reflected the key feature of our school. Furthermore, in promoting NETDS to our colleagues and students, we consciously de-emphasized the fact that they were a select group of students and focused more on their commitment to social justice through schooling. And yet, when it comes to promoting our students and program to external stakeholders such as potential practicum placement schools, employers and partner schools, we found ourselves stressing the academically selective nature of grouping as a way to make our students and the program attractive to them. Hence tacitly reinforcing the prevailing, conservative policy discourse on teacher quality/effectiveness.

In addition to our ideological concerns about the program, specific institutional features of our school and its priority also shaped some of the logistical decision we made about NETDS. We chose to work with external students in Greater Western Sydney Area, the area known for socio-economic disparity and also the area from which UNE School of Education draw the largest number of external students, roughly 15-20% of its external enrolment. The choice of the area addressed the strategic interest of UNE at the time, as it was soon after the launch of its outreach campus in Parramatta and our school was in the process of developing closer ties with schools in the region. Our plan was to use the outreach campus and its advanced ICT facilities for seminars and meeting with NETDS students. Along with the launch of the UNE Facebook page, we thought that the regular meetings and seminars with the students in Parramatta and video conferences would work towards the establishment of the kind of community of practice, or 'a distinct cohort with an explicit focus on issues related to disadvantage and poverty' (Burnett & Lampert, 2011, p. 449), the

key to the success of NETDS at QUT. Targeting students in Greater Western Sydney was also appropriate in terms of preparing students to work in disadvantaged schools in their own communities. Indeed, all the participants in our NETDS are from the area and show strong commitment to improving educational outcomes in their own disadvantaged communities.

What we underestimated, however, was the challenging circumstance under which many of our external students pursue their education degrees. We now realize that this reflects the relatively privileged circumstance of our own university education. The majority of our external students are mature-aged (on average mid 30s) with multiple responsibilities of family care, fulltime jobs and other life commitments. All, except for two, of our NETDS participants were women with small or growing children. These extra responsibilities considerably interrupted their study progressions, with more than a few students taking an extended leave of absence from their studies. Many of our students constantly switch their enrolment status, from part-time to fulltime and vice versa, depending on the changing circumstance of their study. This has made it virtually impossible to predict when they are to complete their degree programs. This forced us to drop the QUT's yearly cohort model where 20 or so new students are recruited into the program each year, and instead adopted a cyclical model where new recruits join the group whenever the existing students graduate. Needless to say, this has made it difficult to meet the annual program deliverable of producing 20 graduates working in disadvantaged schools each year.

The problem of distance was another issue underestimated by us. Close partnership with disadvantaged schools was something we aspired for in the first stage of the program, but soon we realized the difficulty of working in the area that our School of Education does not traditionally enjoy major presence as the provider of future teacher workforce. Many of our students struggled to secure practicum placement, and likewise we struggled to develop partnership with disadvantaged schools. We have worked with two schools in the area to organize one-day workshop where teachers and principals helped us run various workshops for our NETDS participants. However, none of these have yet resulted in any sustaining partnership. We recognize this as a major shortcoming of our NETDS program, because as extensive research literature on school effectiveness has amply shown, school effectiveness is little to do with 'the aggregated efforts of well-intentioned teachers and principals acting independently of one another' (Anderson, 2008, p.169). Only when programs such as NETDS are embedded in the larger school reform, school-wide norms and processes, which shape the quality of student learning, are renegotiated for better learning outcomes. Furthermore, the distance has posed us challenge in developing a cohesive sense of community among the NETDS participants. Perhaps this, along with their competing demands in life, explains their rather disappointment attendance at the once-per-term workshops we held at the outreach campus or chosen schools in Western Sydney.

Notwithstanding the series of ideological and logistical challenges that we had to work through, the program has achieved some modest success. Most importantly, we have been able to place at least four graduates in disadvantaged schools in Greater Western Sydney. We also believe that the program has proven effective in nurturing the participants' commitment to social justice in education. We share with the NETDS founders' view that ideological commitment is something that can be nurtured over time through meaningful pedagogic engagements. In our case, we attempted to achieve this through interactions at seminars and workshops and via emails, Facebook and phone calls. We have aspired for a different kind of relationship with the participants that is not easily attainable in our regular face-to-face or online teaching. No doubt the financial resource provided by the Origin Foundation was a big factor, as it releases us from regular teaching duties so that we can focus on NETDS.

However, this last point goes to the very heart of ideological contradiction with NETDS. The NETDS funding enabled us to reduce our teaching load and hence work closely with the NETDS cohort, the selective group of students. The problem of inequitable resource allocation becomes apparent when we consider that our NETDS cohort has thus far included only a handful of students who have come from disadvantaged family backgrounds, and the majority of the students are middle-class and mostly White students. Those “regular” students that we are exempted from teaching will not receive the kind of individualized attention and care that we can provide to NETDS students and will be taught by casual academic staff, who are usually less experienced and qualified. This is the very problem inherent with the conservative and liberal approaches, as discussed earlier. We ask ourselves: Have we actually contributed to social justice through NETDS and if so at what cost has this been achieved? What more could we have done to steer the program so that we would have perhaps felt less conflicted about what we have done? Or is this the ultimate dilemma that we, as teacher educators working for social justice, must live and work with in the current policy climate of teacher education reform?

Concluding Thoughts

Part of what is required to achieve social justice through teacher education under the current political climate is to be reflective about the contradictory consequences of our action. Our collective, critical self-reflection has illuminated how the gap between our ideological commitment and the program design has created a series of ideological and logistical issues for us to navigate. One of the most salient ideological issues for us was the NETDS’s use of a conservative approach to student recruitment, the use of GPAs as the non-negotiable selection criteria. Much of our struggles centred on ways to mitigate the possible consequences of removing top-tier students from the rest of the student population. It makes strategic sense to tinker with the dominant political discourse around exceptional teachers/teaching as a way to secure the resources needed to achieve social justice goals. However, this tactical move comes with certain consequences, both seen and unseen; most importantly it can foreclose the possibilities for more radical and fundamental changes to the very structure of education system that continues to reproduce inequities in education.

While it has been such a pleasure to be working closely with the highly motivated and competent group of students who are passionate about making a difference in disadvantaged schools and communities, we also know that the kind of quality learning opportunity enabled by NETDS should be provided to all of our education students regardless of their initial commitment to social justice and their academic standings. This belief has surely been tested many times in the course of our NETDS work, and yet the collective self-reflective exercise has helped us realize our continued commitment to this belief and hence our lingering anxiety about NETDS. More wide-scale application of the kind of pre-service teacher training and mentorship provided through NETDS is warranted, given that any teachers, regardless of their initial intention to teach in disadvantaged schools, can potentially work in such schools. If the limited source constrains such a broader provision of the program, then it may be worthwhile to specifically target pre-service teachers from, and living in, disadvantaged contexts because of their likelihood of living permanently in the communities where they grew up. This is a particularly pertinent issue to our school which draws a large number of teacher education students from rural, disadvantaged communities, which generally suffer from high teacher turnover rates (Green, 2008). This targeted approach seems more likely to create the kind of genuine community-school relationship, the importance of which was amply demonstrated by the evaluation of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP)

(Lingard, 1998). Our decision to work exclusively with students and schools in Western Sydney reflected this concern, though, as we have explored, its efficacy has been compromised by the series of logistical decisions we made.

We have no doubt that NETDS has a potential to evolve into such a robust program, and this was our initial ambition when getting involved in the program. While this ambition continues to drive our work for NETDS, another part of us remains undecided about the efficacy of the model, leaving us both hopeful and doubtful about its future potentials. Time will tell whether or not NETDS and our work at UNE will be recognized as a worthwhile social justice initiative in teacher education, but till then we will have to keep living through/with the moral/ethical and ideological dilemmas and stay vigilant to any unexpected and unforeseen consequences of our action.

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