School Leaders' Perspectives on Educating Teachers to Work in Vulnerable Communities: New Insights from the Coal Face

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Abstract: Classroom teacher quality can significantly impact student learning outcomes. Increased access to skilled teachers in low socioeconomic status (SES) schools could substantially improve the learning outcomes and engagement levels of young people.
The National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS) programme is a university based Teacher Education programme that has been implemented by Deakin University in the Geelong/Werribee area. It seeks to prepare high achieving pre-service teachers (PSTs) to teach in low SES school settings.
This project investigated the views of school leadership teams in low SES schools including their views of an exemplary teacher, and the understandings and skills deemed necessary for pre-service teachers undertaking placements in low SES schools. These findings will be used to develop and enhance the NETDS programme at Deakin University, build new models of collaborative professional learning and guide schools in mentoring new graduates for a longer-term commitment to disadvantaged school communities.

Introduction

There is a recurring theme that has recently dominated discussion about education and teachers in both local and global contexts. Teaching and teacher education are broken and they need to be fixed (Cochran-Smith, Piazza, & Power, 2013, p.7). Government policy makers and the media have engaged in sustained criticism of teacher and teaching quality, along with an indictment of higher education providers for teacher education in both the USA (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013, Darling Hammond, 2012, Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel & Rothstein, 2012), and in the UK (Siraj, Taggart, Melhuish, Sammons, & Sylva, 2014; Ko & Sammons, 2013). In Australia, this discourse is being rapidly translated into new policy. The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) released their recommendations for teacher education in 2015, *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (TEMAG, 2015) with a set of recommendations that were largely adopted by the Australian Government, resulting in substantial changes to the future preparation of teachers in Australian universities and colleges. Key elements of this policy include more rigorous accreditation processes for teacher education programmes, stronger evidence of classroom readiness and closer working relationships between universities and schools. On this last point the *Action Now* report states:

> Higher education providers, school systems and schools working together to achieve strong graduate and student outcomes. Partnerships ensuring initial teacher education meets the needs of employers and schools. Professional

experience integrated with provider-based learning (Department of Education and Training, 2015, p. vii).

The needs of students from disadvantaged communities have also been recently highlighted. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in Australia in the areas of Mathematics, Reading and Science continue to fall and the gap between students in low SES schools and those in more privileged schools continues to widen (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Buckley, 2012). There are many factors, however, that may contribute to the decline in PISA results and the relationship between wealth and education outcomes are by no means linear.

The Gonski report (Review of Funding of Schooling, 2011) also outlined a significant gap between Australia's highest and lowest performing students. The report unequivocally called for a dramatic increase in school funding and recommended a new funding model to ensure that funding was closely tied to educational need. The report was originally translated into the Australian Government *Better Schools* funding model, but has since encountered various revisions and uncertainty. This hope for children with a high level of educational need has now endured two elections as a political football with limited tangible outcomes for Australian children in vulnerable communities. More recently, the Victorian State Government released the Bracks Report (Department of Education and Training, Government School Funding Review, 2016). This report called for a fairer funding architecture so that "education funding be directed to where it will achieve the biggest impact for students with the greatest needs" (p. 4) and recommended that we should be "encouraging high performing teachers to work in disadvantaged schools through new incentives" (p. 5).

It is in this volatile policy context that Deakin University has recently joined the National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools Programme (NETDS). This programme was developed at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and has been previously described in some detail (Lampert & Burnett, 2014). This QUT initiative commenced in 2008 as the Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged schools (ETDS) programme. It involves the invitation of the highest performing students in a four-year Bachelor of Education undergraduate teacher education programme to participate in the programme in their third and fourth years of study. In Year Three and Year Four of the degree they complete their school placements in low SES schools and are provided with additional content and reflection opportunities by enhancing one of their regular units of study, coming together as one cohesive seminar group. Additional support is provided on placement through site visits from the program coordinators (Lampert & Burnett, 2014). The NETDS programme at Deakin University commenced in 2015, initially at the Waurn Ponds Campus in Geelong.

Working in low SES communities is characterised by complexity and challenges (e.g. Munns, Hatton & Gilbert, 2013; Sawyer, Callow, Munns & Zammit, 2013) that depend on context and vary significantly across schools. Munns, Hatton & Gilbert (2013, p.37) describe the challenges for teachers in low SES school communities that frame the research of the Fair Go Project. These include: challenges related to accountability to the education system; developing a sense of place in the community; the experience and expectations among staff; and, at a classroom level, the diversity of learners, their needs and the teaching and learning pressures that arise from these.
Understanding challenges such as these can help us better appreciate teaching and working in low SES schools and communities and the effect it may have on the social, emotional and academic outcomes of students. If teachers view challenge as a positive as Fair Go teachers have done (Munns, Hatton & Gilbert, 2013) the potential for developing and refining pedagogies in their classrooms is great. Hence, increasing understanding of disadvantage and the skills and qualities of effective teachers in the context of vulnerable communities and how

this can improve the preparation of pre-service teacher undertaking placement in low SES schools is critical.

The principles of the ETDS programme (now the NETDS programme), has been well supported by a range of more recent research relating to skills and qualities of effective teachers and teaching in the context of schools in vulnerable communities. Two significant features of effective teachers emerge from this research. The first relates to the content and pedagogical knowledge of effective teachers in low SES schools. In the *Fair Go* project, Sawyer, Callow, Munns and Zammit (2013) studied exemplary teachers teaching in vulnerable communities in the Western suburbs of Sydney. They use the terms High Cognitive and High Operative to describe the classrooms facilitated by the teachers in the *Fair Go* project. High cognitive referred to way that higher order thinking was valued in these classrooms while teachers engaged in sustained and ongoing conversations about learning itself. High Operative is the term Sawyer and his colleagues use to describe the way *Fair Go* teachers prioritized learning over behaviour and ensured the whole classroom made learning its top priority. In addition, a range of effective pedagogical practices were thoughtfully implemented to build student understanding. Other researchers have also emphasized the importance of teacher skills and knowledge in disadvantaged schools (Hayes, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The second key feature of teachers who appear to make a difference for students in vulnerable communities relates to the way they build relationships both with students in their classrooms, with their families and with their colleagues as part of strong school community. In the *Fair Go* project, this idea was labelled "High Affective" focusing on the way effective teachers build a sense of community and create classroom environments where students are able to take risks (Sawyer et al., 2013). Hong and Day (2016) describe teaching in low SES schools as emotional work. "Sustained engagement, by definition, requires authentic caring relationships in which teachers are able to draw upon continuing reserves of emotional energy on a daily basis" (p.116). Schools and classrooms demand high energy (physical, emotional, social emotional) that can challenge teachers personally. Successful teaching and learning requires cognitive, social and emotional investment (Laursen & Neilsen, 2016; Crosnoe, 2011, Johnson 2008) by both teachers and students (Day 2016; Day & Gu, 2013; Cornelius & White, 2007; Villages, 2007).

These key features are recognised in the principles underpinning the NETDS programme which relate to social justice and a sociocultural understanding of educational disadvantage. Drawing on complex frameworks of quality teaching the NETDS body of work examines how teachers' skills, attributes and knowledge are mediated by specialised teaching programs. For example, Lampert and Burnett (2015) have identified that a sophisticated understanding of poverty and disadvantage, resilience, critical reflection and a sense of efficacy as important attributes that can be taught and developed in order to achieve quality teaching and learning. Developing such knowledge and attributes in preservice teachers, along with investing in the school community (Munns, Hatton & Gilbert, 2013) supports the goals of the Teaching Academies for Professional Practice at Deakin University that are committed to sharing the task of preparing PSTs and supporting quality education and teaching and learning in schools.

The introduction of the NETDS programme at Deakin University coincided with the extension of the Teaching Academies for Professional Practice by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (Teaching Academies for Professional Practice, 2015). A Teaching Academy is a cluster of schools working closely in partnership with a university to deliver innovative teacher education through strong collaboration. Deakin University has a Teaching Academy in Geelong and in Werribee with 28 schools, many of which are in low SES communities. These academies create an environment where schools and the universities

share the task of preparing teachers, supported by boundary crossing site directors and using a model of structured and scaffolded conversations between mentor teachers, leadership teams, university academics and preservice teachers (known as "assessment circles") to explore key elements of teaching practice. The teaching academy model aligns closely with the *Action Now* recommendation for closer working relationships between universities and with schools

The Teaching Academies in Geelong and Werribee have provided a new focus on collaborative approaches to teacher preparation within the Geelong/Werribee school community. NETDS schools have been recruited both within the Teaching Academy and from schools that do not currently participate in an academy but who meet the NETDS criteria of an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) level of less than 1000 (Lampert and Burnett, 2014). ICSEA is a measure of school socio educational advantage developed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. It is based on four main variables: SES, remoteness, percent indigenous and language background. The development of the academy has heightened awareness of the importance of views of school leadership teams on the needs of their school, their perspectives on quality teaching and the key features they are looking for in a new graduate teacher. At a practical level, Victorian government schools have been self-governing since 1998 and it is principals and representatives from their schools who will employ new graduate teachers. Consequently, their views are highly relevant to teacher preparation. More broadly, principals and school executive teams strongly influence the school climate and graduate teacher experience. The NETDS programme needs to be well informed about school leaders' perspectives to ensure that new graduates feel prepared for life as a graduate teacher. Finally, the views expressed by school leaders on the way teachers and teaching should match the needs of vulnerable communities provide us with insights into the bigger philosophical lens through which we can understand the cultural disposition of a school. New staff and students become socialized into the organizational and personal relationships that determine the school culture and can be understood in terms of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. In their discussion of school climate, Glover & Coleman (2005) applied the concept of 'habitus' to their account of the way school leaders bring a set of dispositions to the way they act, think and feel in the task of school leadership. These are influenced by their own socialization processes and may not always directly reflect their stated values and beliefs.

The aim here is to try to understand the complexities of working in vulnerable communities and highlight school leaders' perspectives about quality teachers and teaching in low SES schools, by making their views more visible. Their views on exemplary teachers and the understandings and skills necessary for preservice teachers in low SES school contexts will contribute to the preparation of preservice teachers and a more effective model of collaborative professional learning, leading to a shared sustained commitment to disadvantaged school communities.

This project investigates the views of principals and other members of the school leadership team in 17 schools who are school partners in the new NETDS program at Deakin University. There are few published studies that have explored the views of school leaders who work in vulnerable communities. This study explored the following questions:
1.	What do school leaders believe are the qualities of an exemplary teacher in a low SES school?
2.	What do school leaders believe preservice teachers need to know to be prepared for placements in a low SES schools?
3.	What do school leaders believe are the skills preservice teachers need to develop to be most effective in low SES schools?

Methods

The study investigated the views held by principals and other school leaders on teacher effectiveness and student engagement and the challenges teachers encounter in low SES schools. It explored the ways leadership teams describe exemplary teachers and teaching in the context of low SES schools. It also explored school leadership beliefs about the dispositions and skills needed by preservice teachers who undertake professional experience placements in schools in vulnerable communities.

Participants

The data used in this paper were drawn from interviews with principals and other school leaders (including deputy principals and leading teachers) across 17 low SES schools in the Geelong and Werribee areas in Victoria, Australia.

The identity and names of the participants are anonymised in this paper. Approval for this study and the consent procedures was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee Deakin University, Department of Education and Training Victoria, and the Catholic Education Office Victoria.

Eleven principals and four deputy principals across fifteen schools were individually interviewed, with two schools electing to be interviewed as a leadership team. One of these teams comprised the principal, deputy/assistant principal and seven leading teachers and the other team comprised the deputy/assistant principal and one leading teacher (See Table 1). Participants were interviewed once, with interviews lasting between 20 to 40 minutes each. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and reviewed several times to ensure completeness of the data.

Participants	Gender male (m) Female (f)	School type / level	School population
TV	F	F-6	195
RA	M	F-6	109
FL	M	F-6	211
GR	F	F-6	98
OS	F	F-6	371
AD	F	F-6	475
NE+ (9)	F	F-6	704
DG	M	F-6	220
TH	M	F-6	117
CL	M	F-6	119
AO	M	F-6	215
EM+ (2)	F	F-9	1194
TC	F	F-9	1508
BB	M	F-12	2014
VS	F	F-12	1780
SP	M	7-12	742
HS	M	7-12	503

NB: + indicates the schools where the interview was conducted with the leadership team

Table 1: Research participants and school characteristics

Interviews

The research employed a qualitative grounded approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 2014), using semi structured interview questions as a reference guide for the interviewer, while following the natural flow of participants' responses. The interview questions are included in Appendix A. Seven interview questions were asked in the data collection phase of

the study but only three questions have been analysed for the purpose of this paper. The other question responses will be reported in future publications.

The interviewer employed as a research assistant in this project was an ex-principal from the local area. His experience as a school leader was invaluable for building the relationships with the project participants and supporting the validity and quality of the conversations that were recorded.

Data Analysis

Data were manually analysed inductively (Miles & Huberman, 1994) across cases to reduce and display data to assist in drawing conclusions. The data was read by each researcher at different times to familiarise with the data and to get a sense of it as a whole. Each researcher independently read and reread the transcripts highlighting significant elements which served as coding categories related to each interview question. These were repeatedly compared and contrasted within and across the participants' transcripts, so that refined coding categories were generated. The repeated sortings, codings, and comparisons characterising the grounded theory approach took place until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The categories that emerged from this process were assigned labels.

Findings
Qualities of Exemplary Teachers (Research Question 1)

In describing exemplary teachers in their schools, all school leaders identified attributes related to i) curriculum and pedagogical expertise, ii) relationship building, iii) contextual understanding, and iv) personal professional qualities.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Expertise

The majority of school leaders in this study (12 of 17 interviews) described exemplary teachers as having comprehensive curriculum and pedagogical knowledge and skills that enabled them to differentiate the curriculum to manage the diverse and individual needs of their students. School leaders described exemplary teachers as having *"...high teaching efficacy"*, *"expertise in the craft of teaching"*, and *"a grab bag of skills to manoeuvre through difficulties"*. School leaders described exemplary teachers as those who *"...know their students"*, know how to *"...engage and challenge learners"*, and those who *"have high expectations"* and encourage *"... achievement and success"* for all learners. According to these school leaders, a passion for and efficacy in teaching, high expectations, challenging curriculum and understandings of children were qualities that exemplary teachers working in low SES schools exhibited. For instance, DG and AD explained,

> *"The exemplary teachers at our school provide really top quality feedback. They're very explicit and it goes in with the students know exactly what they need to understand how they're going to progress in their learning. ...Normally they've set their goals and they're able to provide those students feedback on development of the individual goals ...And how they can go about taking it to the next step." (DG p.1)*
> *"Obviously, they need to be pedagogical experts, that they are using tried and true methods in learning – in enabling the students to learn in the different learning areas - particularly for our kids in English and in Mathematics and*

> *Science and ICT. They're our sort of – oh, and social and emotional learning – they would be our focus areas." (AD p.1)*

In these school leaders' accounts, there was strong agreement that while expertise in curriculum and pedagogy was significant for teaching in low SES schools, it needed to be balanced with understanding children, their development, background, and children's social emotional and learning needs. According to GR and OS, exemplary teachers,

> *"...have that understanding of where the children are coming from each day, and how they're ready to learn, is important. But to then know how to teach them is also going to obviously make them an exemplary teacher. One I've got in mind at the moment has an amazing knowledge of curriculum, which means she then provides to that point of need teaching. And it's not always about just where they're at with their learning, it's about how they've come in for that day and what they need to be ready to learn."* (GR p.1)

> *"Underneath all that [relationships] of course is expertise in their craft, in teaching; engagement – how to hook those kids in that are, you know we often get kids that are disengaged. But also in this environment there's, often school is the safe place, school is the routine, school is where they come and so that being able to set systems and routines in place so that there's that assurity for kids every day, that when they come to school this is, the expectations are very clear and those expectations are high."* (OS p. 1)

These school leaders viewed curriculum and pedagogy and positive relationships as interrelated components significant for teaching children in low SES schools.

ii. Building relationships

Nine of the 17 school leaders emphasised the significance of creating quality relationships with students and parents. In their schools, exemplary teachers worked at building positive student-teacher relationships, that demonstrated *"...a genuine interest in the child"* (AO p.1).

> School leaders described exemplary teachers having *"...empathy"*, *"...compassion"*, *"...a strong set of emotional intelligences"* and the ability to, *"...build trust"*. For example,

> *"Number one* [quality] *would be the ability to create a quality relationship with the students. So you would have empathy with their situation but you would still have extremely high expectations of those students as they may be low SES but it certainly doesn't equate with low intelligence so you have to have the high expectations; the ability to create strong relationships and I think a positive confident outlook."* CL p. 1

> Positive relationships contributed to building the school community. FL explained,

> *"So, regardless of low SES we're looking for teachers who understand the importance of communication and building positive relationships. Now, which comes first; relationships, probably is the strength of it. On top of the relationships and communication we're looking for someone who has a sense of helping us to build community, a school community, a place where people feel welcome to come and are comfortable to have their children here, obviously but feel comfortable themselves to become part of who we are as a community and what we're aiming to do as a community, and that's build a community of learners and a place where students can flourish.* (FL p.1)

> *"So above all what I do look for first is someone who is going to be able to be a good team player as a staff member but I mean a team player in my community. So to build those relationships with the kids and the parents because for us*

*because those relationships are built first the learning is not going to happen
and the support is not going to happen. So I really need someone who is going
to build relationships. So that's what I look for.* (TV p.1)

Understanding Context

Nine of the 17 school leaders explained that exemplary teachers need to demonstrate
an understanding of the low SES school context. This included an understanding of the
school community, children's backgrounds and individual needs, parental backgrounds and
expectations and generational poverty. With the relevant contextual knowledge and
understandings, teachers were in a stronger position to maximise the impact of their practice
through their planning, teaching and assessment and in their interactions with children and
families. School leaders stressed the significance of having an understanding of their specific
community needs and how this impacted on teaching and relationship building within the
classroom. For example,

*"I think the most important thing is that the teacher understands the community.
That's a real priority for us because it's about the whole child. Certainly we
believe that teaching and learning is the critical most important part of their
teaching. But to also support the welfare and wellbeing across the students and
have an understanding of where they've come from and what their needs are will
certainly provide a better connection to the families, but more importantly to
that student in their classroom."* (GR p.1)
*And they need a greater understanding of the background that the children bring
to school in order to accommodate the children's needs adequately because they
are quite different, they require quite different approaches, the level of
intervention is much higher and the level of individualised, individualising of
educational programs is much more intense."* (RA p.1)
"No school can succeed without getting the parents engaged." (RA p.5)

Personal and Professional Qualities

All school leaders identified a range of personal qualities they believed characterised
the exemplary teachers in their schools. These included social emotional intelligence,
resilience and coping strategies, effective communication and collaborative skills, a positive
open mind set, the desire to continue and grow in their own learning, as well as a desire for
their students to develop and succeed. For example,

*"They need to have a lot more resilience than teachers in other schools, they
need to have the same aspirations for the children as the teachers in other
schools but they have to be prepared to start from a much lower base".* (RA p.
1)
*"...teachers who want to work collaboratively as a team. So they have to be
genuine about wanting to do that, because it's – you have to work together in
order to move these children. .... So you don't want a fixed mindset, so to
speak, you want someone with a growth mindset and who really values learning,
not only within their students but within themselves".* (EM+ p. 1)
*"And building on that… the attribute of wanting to learn and having that drive
to learn is also important in the academic side of things as well. … So not just
having teachers who are enthusiastic and love students, but who love education
and love the theory of education".* (EM+ p. 1)

Furthermore, exemplary teachers were described as creative, patient, tolerant and demonstrated a willingness to understand people and their life circumstances. EM+ explained that exemplary teachers,

> "...want to develop an understanding of people and their situations. Because here we have children who come from many different backgrounds and they've had many different life experiences. And you need to put aside what you know about life and to be – develop your understanding, demonstrate patience in wanting to learn about our students and their backgrounds so that you can best work with them and with their families as well." (EM+ p.1)

The qualities exemplary teachers had were enacted in a professional capacity in the classroom, in working with parents, staff and students to support their teaching and student learning.

Pre-Service Teacher Preparation for Undertaking Placements in Low SES Schools (Research Questions 2 And 3)

School leaders offered a wide range of responses in relation to the types of understandings and skills pre-service teachers needed to develop in preparation for placement, and for working in low SES schools. Analysis of the data revealed that the most dominant themes in order of the frequency of responses were i) contextual awareness and impact, ii) curriculum and pedagogy, iii) resilience and relationship, and iv) professional conduct and engagement.

Contextual Awareness and Impact

In contrast to their discussion of exemplary teachers, the most dominant theme that emerged from the analysis of school leaders' views of the needs of preservice teachers was an understanding of the school community in low SES contexts. Twelve of the 17 school leaders identified that an understanding of generational poverty, vulnerable communities and families, and the impact of trauma on children were needed to prepare PSTs for placement in their schools. They developed these ideas further, commenting that it was an understanding of how this is manifested in the classroom in terms of social emotional, academic and behavioural aspects of student learning that was most important.

> "So if they could get a special needs background or skills that's really good because a lot of our kids come in with special needs and when I say special needs I'm talking about traumatised children; children that have had no bonding; children that come from drug related environments or abuse all these sorts of things and just neglect. So if you've got that welfare sort of knowledge behind you it sort of helps". (AL p.5)
> "I think they probably have to have a little bit of an understanding what it actually means, because sometimes they can come in and it will be their first time that they've ever been in a low SES area." (GR p.6)
> "…it would be very helpful if they actually had an understanding of what actually makes a school officially a low SES school. Things like the student family occupation, the student family education index and those sort of things. That would give them some skills that they would be able to transfer to whatever workplace setting they go in if they know straight away this is a school that's .67 they've got a fair idea of what that means as opposed to .42 or .86." (NE+ p. 7)

> *"...I would like them to – because of our particular needs here, to know about that generational poverty, and what trauma does to affect the brain, and how children learn because of that. I think that would be really good for them to have some understanding. And I guess for them to ask some questions that are also still within that element of the confidentiality side of things too. -"* (GR p.6)

Of these twelve school leaders, six also emphasised the importance of PSTs discarding preconceived ideas, values or cultural assumptions. For example,

> *"So those teachers arrive with certain cultural assumptions, they arrive with a cultural assumption that kids will find what they're going to offer interesting, they arrive with a cultural assumption that the parents will be interested in their children's schooling. They arrive with cultural assumptions about children's appearance, they'll arrive with cultural assumptions about what children should be eating, their nutrition and healthcare and things like that. When children come from generational poverty backgrounds none of those assumptions hold, they also have very rarely had experience with the net effect that childhood trauma has on children's development. So their cultural background has left them devoid of understanding and even empathy at the beginning for why the children from these backgrounds seem to be calm one moment and absolutely out of their tree the next. So there's a lot of additional education that these teachers need to do in order to get their heads around those issues."* (RA p 5**).**
> *And you need to put aside what you know about life and to be – develop your understanding, demonstrate patience in wanting to learn about our students and their backgrounds so that you can best work with them and with their families as well. (*EM+ p.1)

Related to this, school leaders, also highlighted the importance of not perpetuating myths about low SES schools/students and academic outcomes. For example, while recognising the importance for PSTs having background knowledge of low SES contexts and communities, NE+ commented,

> *"...As long as they don't go in thinking because it's a low-...Socio economic school that it's going to be a low academic school as well."* (NE+p.7)

Rather having the skill set and expectations for *"...improving student outcomes"* (NE+ p.9)

Curriculum and Pedagogy

While recognising PSTs as inexperienced, beginning teachers, 11 of 17 school leaders emphasised the need for PSTs to have sound pedagogical and curriculum knowledge and skills, including strong literacy and numeracy and good classroom management skills. For example,

> *"...high academic standards, we really do need people with really good literacy skills themselves to be the role models and to be the teachers. We operate on the theory that you can't give what you haven't got and we want those who've got it."* (NE+ p.9)
> *" ...And as well as the high skills I think, having really high skills in literacy and numeracy and also in managing the learning environment and knowing, having a repertoire of skills to deal with that because you can have the best literacy but if you can't manage the learning environment then that will go as well."* (NE+ p.9)

School leaders explained that sound knowledge and skills in curriculum and pedagogy would enable PST's to differentiate the curriculum, accommodate the needs of children, be flexible to daily circumstances, and create a range of learning opportunities for students. Six school leaders held views that having skills in classroom management would enable PST's to *'...get on with teaching'*. This was strongly related to the next most dominant theme of building relationships.

Relationships and Resilience

Eleven of the seventeen school leaders stated the importance of PSTs being 'resilient' and having an understanding and interpersonal skills required for building positive relationships with students, parents and teaching staff. These school leaders stressed the importance of knowing the child and in developing *"...effective'*, *"...professional"*, *"...respectful relationships"* with students.
"And I know, I'm pretty sure uni's do this all the time, about the relationships with kids, but it's also about effective relationships with kids, that difference of, the professional relationship and the friendship kind of thing." (OS p.5)
"...the differentiating, the flexibility.. and reading situations, being able to sort of, and again that comes I guess with experience, but if you know, if they've got these opportunities to work in these schools, they can see well there's lots of different scenarios of when to intervene, how much you intervene, what you say, what you don't say... so again it just gets back to knowing individuals and knowing how to build those relationships with them." (OS p.5)
"... I would expect them to be ... passionate about the profession and improving the student outcomes, developing those respectful relationships." (MF, p.9)
School leaders also emphasised that for PSTs working in low SES schools understanding parents' issues and needs and developing the skills of communication to effectively communicate with parents was critical.
"I suppose it's understanding especially when you're dealing with parents – they will come to you with issues that you might have particularly had in your life but you're prepared to understand that that's occurring in theirs. You can roll your eyes and say why do they continually do it this way if it doesn't work or why do they scream at their kid all day and when the kid just doesn't react and doesn't do it because they don't know any better and that's the way they were raised so it's understanding; it's the tolerance of that. If can develop tolerance to that and then trying to advise without looking like you are being condescending or being a bit too smart." (TS p.7)
"...understand that you've got parents you're going to deal with as well it's not just the students, they go home and tell a tale so being transparent, being open, being communicating with the families before the children get home or being on the phone let's get you in, let's work at how we can do this. I'm in a three way conference we always say at this school it's a three way partnership; family, student and staff; if we can get everybody on the same page and then dealing with reality, you do what you can do and you've got to understand that you can only do so much but there's nothing wrong in having that expectations for all your students". (LB p. 4)
School leaders stated that having a positive mindset and attitude would prepare PSTs to cope with the daily challenges and issues encountered in working in low SES schools. The 11 school leaders described resilience in terms of having *"...a positive open mindset"*, *"...an unshakable attitude"*, *"...strategic thinking"*, *"flexible"*, the

ability to *"...seek help" and* use the support network available among the staff in their placement schools. One school leader advised PSTs working in low SES schools to *'expect rough days'.*

> *"So they need to have an open mind, they will come across or hear about family violence, they - not will, they're likely to. They might come across drug affected or alcohol affected parents and they'll need to know what to do about that. And they'll face all of those, they're likely to face all of those middle class issues I said our teachers have to overcome as well. So it's about, it's about these students wanting to make a difference, having an open mind and having the resilience to cope with things that are outside their comfort level initially".* (RA p.8)
>
> *I think that they need skills in communication. Often you have to have difficult conversations – not only with the kids but with their parents – so having those communication skills. And they need strategic thinking, because you need to look at a situation and keep your mind on the end goal and work out what's worth giving in to, to get the long term goal happening.* (AD p.5)
>
> *"I think one of the skills here that all of our teachers need is they need to be flexible, because things don't always run smoothly and something happens with a child at play time or at lunch time and then that can – unless we really manage it really well, and work really well with that student, it can come in and it can throw all your plans up in the air. ...So, for pre-service teachers I think it's really important to be really observant and to look at the strategies that teachers are using, but also to be able to be flexible and to think on your feet, and I know that's a really hard thing when you're a pre-service teacher but being able to think two steps ahead of where the kids are going to be is really vital."* (TH p.6)

Professional Conduct and Engagement

In preparation for placement, nine school leaders emphasised the significance of PSTs *"...connecting with their mentor",* being confident, passionate about teaching and the profession, professional in behaviour and attitude, and contributing to the school.

> *"And it's not so much about the knowledge that you come in with, but the attitude and the personalities of teachers – pre-service teachers coming in. So if they're showing that they are ready to walk the walk the entire time."* (EM+ p.5)
>
> *"...passionate about the profession and improving the student outcomes, developing those respectful relationships. One of the things I notice too is those people that go a bit extra like for example Danni is coming back to do volunteer work in the school. That shows a commitment to the children she's working with and her current time here. We've had other teachers in the class to come on school camps and they give up their time and they want to be part of our school community."* (NE+ p.9)

These school leaders encouraged PSTs to not only take the opportunity to learn from the school but to also share what they know.

> *"That they take the opportunity when they're here and just live every single minute of it, because it's the old saying the more you put in the more you're going to get out of it. And just to remind the pre-service teachers that they might be looking and learning from us, but they have so much to offer us. They're in there with the Universities and they are learning the latest of the latest, and we want to know about that. So they do have a lot to give. And to remember that and to speak up when they*

want to speak up, we encourage that. And just to be part of the school, take things on, live it." (EM+ p.5)

Additionally school leaders conveyed the view that PSTs needed *'to be personable'*, collegial and part of the staff, with a strong work ethic.

> *"...you've got to have confidence. You've got to have that positive outlook that you're here to learn and learn and learn but you're also here to give of yourself but be part of a staff for those few weeks you're here. You've got to be prepared to work hard."* (CL p. 6)

Discussion

New models of collaborative teacher education are highlighting the value of the voice of school leaders in the preparation of new graduate teachers. In this study, the views of school leaders in low SES schools were examined in regard to the qualities of exemplary teachers and the skills and understandings required of preservice teachers to prepare them to teach in low SES schools. These perspectives will be considered in the process of facilitating implementation of the NETDS programme to support the development of exceptional teaching in vulnerable communities by high performing graduate teachers.

Exemplary Teachers in low SES Schools

School leaders were asked about the qualities of an 'exemplary' teacher in a low SES school. The most dominant theme that emerged from the interviews with school leaders related to Curriculum and Pedagogy expertise. This is not a surprising finding and it is well supported by other studies such as the *Fair Go* project (Munns, Hatton & Gilbert, 2013; Sawyer et al., 2013). In their discussion of teaching in the *Fair Go* low SES communities, Munns, Hatton and Gilbert (2013) observe that "the importance of classrooms encouraging high levels of student engagement in challenging contexts cannot be overstated (p 35)". School leaders in our study clearly articulated what they meant by Curriculum and Pedagogy expertise. They described it as teachers holding high expectations for their students, helping them to set appropriate goals and supporting those goals with top quality feedback. Exemplary teachers had a high level of curriculum knowledge and used this for "point of need" teaching. School leaders contextualised this curriculum and pedagogy knowledge. Best practice alone did not go far enough in low SES schools. Exemplary teachers were those who could understand each student's current state of mind and match their teaching to it. As GR says "*And it's not always about just where they're at with their learning, it's about how they've come in for that day and what they need to be ready to learn".* This view is reinforced by Cochran-Smith (2004). She describes an effective teacher as one who not only demonstrates best instructional practices but also knows when to challenge these practices if they fail to serve a student or group of students. According to school leaders in our study, it is the flexible way that high levels of curriculum and pedagogy knowledge are applied that appears to be the key to working effectively in low SES schools. Also linked to this point is a teacher's knowledge of their school communities. In their school context, curriculum and pedagogy expertise was related to teachers' understandings of the importance of routines, safe and secure learning environments and an emphasis on clear and well established expectations.

This message from school leaders seems somewhat at odds with some of the political discourse and media commentary that has suggested that schools and school systems have

lost their way (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2013). There was no evidence in this study that the leadership in schools had lost sight of the importance of purposeful and evidenced based good teaching and learning. On the contrary, school leaders knew exactly what they were looking for in their teachers and the skills teachers required to make a difference for the students in their school communities. Moreover, they refined their position by observing the importance of being able to apply that expertise in ways that adapted it to the specific needs of students with challenging and unpredictable lives.

School leaders also identified relationship building as a key feature of exemplary teachers. They observed that these teachers exhibit empathy, high levels of emotional intelligence and focus on relationship building to ensure students can meet high expectations. This second strong theme is supported by a range of other studies (Hong & Day, 2016; Sawyer et al., 2013; Cornelius & White, 2007) who have highlighted the foundational nature of relationships in quality teaching and learning. Other studies have shown that quality teaching requires a high level of emotional resilience (Day, 2016), social emotional competence and interpersonal skills. These skills enable teachers to respond to students' individual needs in order to create an optimal social emotional learning environment for desired student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Teacher resilience develops in the context of schools and professional relationships, not simply in their personal attributes (Day, 2016). The finding that school leaders appreciated the value of teacher resilience and valued relationship building so highly suggests that these leaders understood the emotional work that teachers do (Hong & Day, 2016), particularly in the context of vulnerable communities. They understood that positive student-teacher relationships increase student achievement and improve attitudes towards school (Cornelius-White, 2007).

Despite this high level of appreciation of the value and importance of relationship building by school leaders in low SES schools, relationships are rarely the focus of public debate or the current political discourse about teachers and teacher education. Perhaps social and emotional elements of teaching and learning and the resilience of teachers is deemed too complex to measure and quantify? Schools that focus on academic outcomes over social emotional learning may prove inadequate if they don't support their students and teachers' emotional intelligence. Studies have found that it is a combination of strong academic and social support in students' engagement at school, in their academic learning and in their wellbeing that can benefit their students (Crosnoe, 2011; Johnson, 2008). This study suggests that there is substantial work to do to raise the profile of relationships and resilience when defining and debating quality teaching.

Preservice Teachers

School leaders in low SES schools shared their views about how to prepare preservice teachers for working and learning in their school communities. This research was undertaken in the context of the implementation of a new NETDS programme at Deakin University. This programme had commenced as part of a much more integrated model of professional experience for preservice teachers where teaching academies in universities and school communities collaborate to both enhance the quality of teacher preparation and to support school improvement (Department of Education & Training, Victoria, Teaching Academies for Professional Practice, 2015). Four key themes emerged:

Understanding School Context

PSTs need knowledge about the impact of trauma through abuse and neglect on student learning and student behaviour, an understanding of the community measures and factors that are used to create a measure of disadvantage such as ICSEA and an understanding of the way intergenerational poverty impacts on families and students. School leaders placed a strong emphasis on PSTs leaving behind their middle class cultural assumptions and learning to understand that many children in their school may come from a very different place. In making this point school leaders were keen to highlight that there was no place for "do gooders" or patronizing attitudes. The impact of preservice teacher beliefs on their efficacy as preservice teachers is not new to the teacher education debate. There is substantial support for the view that preservice teacher beliefs filter their learning in teacher education programs (Villages, 2007). This concept is often connected to the idea that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses must not only develop skills and knowledge about curriculum and pedagogy but must also nurture appropriate "dispositions". Of particular relevance to this paper is Villages discussion of the disposition to teach all children equitably and to approach education with a focus on each learners' strengths. The school leaders in our study have identified a core challenge for the NETDS programme, which selects the most academic students and then exposes them to a social justice curriculum that challenges their beliefs and aims to support preservice teachers "to view their own cultural dispositions in relation to high poverty classroom settings" (Lampert & Burnett, 2014, p 123)

High Quality Curriculum and Pedagogy Knowledge

According to the school leaders in this study, PSTS need strong literacy and numeracy skills of their own and need to be confident to lead and support numeracy and literacy skill development when they are engaged in teaching. They also emphasized the need for a strong pedagogical repertoire that could be adapted to a wide range of learning abilities. It is impossible to miss the link between these school leaders' views on literacy and numeracy skills and the recent introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy test for ITE student in Australia (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2017) and the public debate that has accompanied its introduction. One of the key elements, however, of the school leaders in the current study relates to preservice teacher *confidence* to lead and support literacy and numeracy. This is an important difference to merely demanding skills in this area. Again, the focus here is on PST disposition and the importance for students from vulnerable communities learning from confident teachers.

Relationships and Resilience

Preservice teachers need a respectful and flexible approach to building relationships with students. Moreover, they need to understand that all relationships are three way, student, family and staff. School leaders urge PSTs to be observant and reflective, adapting and implementing the approaches adopted by their mentor in their own practice. Working in low SES schools may involve some difficult conversations with families and students, further highlighting the need for strong communication skills. Laursen and Neilsen (2016) highlight some of the challenges associated with developing relationship building skills in preservice teachers. They introduced a special programme based around mindfulness to support PSTs to build relationships with their students. This is a substantial undertaking. Moreover, creating opportunities for PSTs to work closely with parents can be a sensitive issue for schools. This

finding provides a challenge for the future directions of the NETDS programme at Deakin University. Ways of engaging our PSTs in reflective practice around the building of relationships with students and their families while out on placement needs careful consideration and substantial planning.

Professional Conduct and Engagement

School leaders valued passion in PSTs. They were looking for people who evidenced a high level of commitment to their students and the school. Volunteering, a high sense of professional conduct and willingness to share their views and ideas were all highly valued. School leaders stated that what PSTs were learning was very valuable for the school community and they urged them to share their ideas. This final theme is a valuable reminder of the reciprocal relationship between schools and universities and preservice teachers and their mentors. It frames PSTs as powerful agents of change with much to give to their placement schools rather than apprentices or mere receptacles for skills and knowledge. Self-identification as an effective teacher has been identified as an important predictor of early career teacher retention (Buchanan et al, 2013; Day, 2016). School leaders' views in this study provides valuable direction for the support of the NETDS teachers at Deakin. The essential conversations that occur during and following placements in this programme must support PSTs to reflect on the strengths they have brought to school and help them to develop their sense of agency.

Conclusion

This study has identified some clearly articulated views of school leaders working in low SES schools. These views provide us with insight into the school culture and climate of these schools. High value was placed on curriculum and pedagogical expertise alongside the way that exemplary teachers support and build relationships. School leaders' beliefs give us some insight into the kind of school culture that preservice teachers and new graduates might experience in these schools, as long as these beliefs translate into practice. School leaders in this study, also identified a wide range specific skills and understandings that preservice teacher might bring to their placements in order to work most effectively in vulnerable communities. Although there were many synergies with the current foci and discussion topics that underpin the NETDS programme, reflecting on the way these were prioritised can help to enhance the NETDS programme at Deakin University in the future. This study has also helped us to build a deeper understanding of the relationships and dispositions of school leaders, providing insight into the complexities of SES communities and discouraging stereotyping of the needs of their teachers, students and families.

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Appendix A

1. What do you believe are the qualities of an 'exemplary' teacher in a low SES school?
2. How do teachers engage students? What does successful student engagement in your school look like?
3. What are the challenges for teachers in low SES schools?
4. How do exemplary teachers deal with these challenges?
5. What do you believe preservice teachers need to know to be prepared for placements in a low SES schools?
6. What skills do preservice teachers need to develop to be most effective in low SES schools?
7. Can you suggest ways that Deakin University could better prepare PSTs to work in low SES schools?