



Research paper

Thriving, not just surviving: The impact of teacher mentors on pre-service teachers in disadvantaged school contexts

Loshini Naidoo*, Sharon Wagner

Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW, 2751, Australia

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teaching for social justice incorporates contextual awareness and understanding.
- Mentor teachers can guide and support pre-service teachers through the complexities of teaching in disadvantaged contexts.
- Experienced mentor teachers can exemplify best practice for teaching in disadvantaged schools.
- Positive practicum experiences are ideal preparation for disadvantaged school teaching careers.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions held by nine mentor teachers from four Australian secondary schools about the impact they have on pre-service teachers during professional placement. Using Fraser's (2000, 2005, 2008) social justice framework as a theoretical lens, this paper examines what can be learnt from these teacher mentors about mentoring in disadvantaged school contexts. These mentor teachers felt their most significant impact was in shaping pre-service teachers' awareness and responsiveness to contextual factors so that they could not only fulfil professional experience requirements, but also be better prepared for potential future teaching opportunities in disadvantaged school contexts.

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1. Introduction

Global concern continues to mount in response to the implications of widening socio-economic disparities. The long-term impact of entrenched inequalities in education, for example, not only influences individual students' future educational and employment opportunities, but also the potential for nations to remain economically competitive in this globalized society (Rowan, Mayer, Kline, Kostogriz & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). Consideration of educational disadvantage, according to a review of Australian school funding, needs to include not only students' socio-economic background but also diverse factors such as refugee or immigrant status, English proficiency, Indigeneity, disability and gender (Gonski et al., 2011). Therefore, in this paper, the term 'educational

disadvantage' relates to socio-educational circumstances (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011), rather than describing an 'inherent characteristic of the individual student or school' (Teach for Australia, 2017, p. 7).

When considering educational inequalities, there has been a tendency to narrow the focus to scores that students achieve in standardized testing regimes such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) in order to exemplify the link between disadvantage and poor academic performance. For example, concerns about the state of education in Australia have spiked since the recent release of the 2018 PISA results which highlighted a difference equivalent to approximately three years between Australian students who are advantaged (highest socio-economic quartile) and those who are disadvantaged (lowest socio-economic quartile) in mathematics, reading and science (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2019; Thomson, De Bortoli, Underwood & Schmid, 2019). Such results tend to reignite concerns about the quality of teaching and

* Corresponding author. Postal address: Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW, 2751, Australia.

E-mail address: L.Naidoo@westernsydney.edu.au (L. Naidoo).

specifically how teachers can be better prepared to meet the needs of disadvantaged students.

As in many other countries, initial teacher training in Australia comprises both coursework and numerous practical professional placements. The placement, commonly referred to as a practicum, has been depicted as one of the most significant and relevant components of pre-service teacher education programs (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014), providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop in their role as teachers, while exploring teaching as a career choice. However, concerns about the quality of education in Australia, especially in low socio-economic and culturally diverse communities, have culminated in a proliferation of reports in which teacher education has frequently been positioned as 'flawed and in need of reform' (Rowan et al., 2015, p. 273). This has led to an increasing emphasis on regulating and monitoring professional standards for teachers as well as the accreditation for initial teacher education programs (Australian Institute of Teaching & School Leadership, 2011, 2018). In addition, there have been a range of policy reforms in order to 'better prepare new teachers for the classroom' (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014, p. 1). Although it is agreed that it is vital for pre-service teachers to be equipped with extensive pedagogical skills and content knowledge, quality teaching extends beyond this predominantly narrow focus evident in these reforms. It would also be simplistic to assume that the quality of teaching can be identified and measured solely on the basis of student academic achievement. This paper argues that 'quality teachers' adopt a holistic teaching approach whereby they embrace the interplay between contextual factors and learning in the classroom.

It has been contended that policies with a narrow focus on improving teacher quality in order to address disadvantage in schools overlook systemic problems such as poverty, or structural inequalities in the education system (Thomson, Lingard & Wrigley, 2012). Calls for a more equitable distribution of 'quality teachers' to schools with large numbers of students from high poverty backgrounds in the United States (Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 2004), for instance, correspond to the populist view that 'better teachers are needed for the children most at risk' (Burnett & Lampert, 2011, p. 447). However, if teacher quality is characterized as the 'silver bullet' for gaining improvements in academic outcomes as well as narrowing the achievement gap (Takayama, Jones & Amazan, 2017, p. 84), it could promote 'indifference to difference' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997, p. 186). The view that a good teacher will always be a good teacher (Loeb, Soland & Fox, 2014), or the expectation that 'a good teacher' can overcome all these issues (Berliner, 2013), for instance, disregards individual student characteristics, including their social, cultural, economic and linguistic backgrounds (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006), as well as broader contextual factors that may enable or constrain a student's academic achievements (Skourdoumbis, 2012). A cross-country, cross-cultural analysis of teaching practices that promote equity, has for instance found that a more nuanced understanding of the differential educational outcomes between students requires a dual focus on out-of-school factors, such as poverty, as well as in-school factors, such as teaching practices (Grudnoff, Haigh, Hill, Cochran-Smith, Ell & Ludlow, 2017).

Issues in relation to the quality of teaching, specifically in disadvantaged schools, is further complicated by the 'widening demographic divide' between teachers and their students in western schooling contexts (Anderson & Stillman, 2013, p. 4). Despite the student population, for example in Australia and the United States, becoming increasingly diverse, it has been claimed that teacher education programs in these countries are preparing predominantly white, middle-class pre-service teachers whose experience with people from diverse socio-economic, cultural,

linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds is limited or non-existent (Milner, 2010; Morrison, 2014; Ryan, Carrington, Selva & Healy, 2009). In Australia, for example, the differences between the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of teachers and the school communities they are working in is usually more pronounced in rural, remote and Indigenous communities (Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Fenwick & Cooper, 2013; Reid et al., 2010). It has also been questioned whether pre-service teachers are being adequately prepared to meet the needs and challenges experienced in disadvantaged contexts (Berry, Montgomery, & Snyder, 2008; Garza, Duchaine & Reynosa, 2013), especially if these teachers 'do not share high poverty experiences' (Scholes et al., 2017 p.27). For example, it has been asserted that unless stereotypical beliefs about students, schools and communities are challenged, pre-service teachers in the United States may limit themselves to decisions based solely on their personal experiences without developing an awareness of the complexity of classroom issues (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009), and they may even develop more negative assumptions about teaching students in disadvantaged contexts (Rushton, 2004).

Although teacher education programs aim to prepare students who will become effective teachers, there are concerns about the high proportion of teachers who leave the profession, as well as the disproportionate allocation of inexperienced teachers to disadvantaged school contexts. It has been estimated that 40–50% of teachers in many western countries leave within the first five years of starting their teaching career (Gallant & Riley, 2014). For example, it has been found that disadvantaged schools in Australia (Brasche & Harrington, 2012) and the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010) are experiencing difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers. Different reasons have been offered for this high level of attrition, such as behaviour management issues, exhaustion and unsupportive school environments (Weldon, 2018) as well as a mismatch between pre-service teachers' perceptions and their daily classroom experiences (Pendergast, Garvis & Keogh, 2011). In addition, it has been found that inexperienced beginning teachers, for example in Australia (Ferfolja, 2008; Lampert, Burnett & Lebhers, 2016) and the United States (Ulucchi & Howard, 2015), are allocated disproportionately to schools attended by minority and low-income students.

With the aim of preparing high-quality teacher graduates for disadvantaged school contexts, Western Sydney University joined the National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools Programme (NETDS) in 2016. The NETDS program, which was developed and implemented at the Queensland University of Technology in 2009 (Lampert & Burnett, 2014), has now been extended to six other Australian university-based teacher education programs. With its aim of cultivating pre-service teachers' 'commitment to social justice' (Burnett & Lampert, 2011, p. 449), the NETDS program seeks to interrupt 'the reproduction of social inequalities through schooling' (Takayama et al., 2017, p. 90). The majority of pre-service teachers from Western Sydney University are drawn from the suburbs of Western Sydney and undertake their professional placement in local schools. These school communities are becoming increasingly diverse, especially in relation to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as prior life experiences. A central focus of the NETDS program is to support and mentor outstanding pre-service teachers (that is, those with exceptional academic performance) to prepare them to teach in disadvantaged school contexts.

It has been contended that mentoring not only effectively supports the professional development of beginning teachers, but can also have implications for teacher retention (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009). For example, pre-service teachers

undertaking a year-long professional placement in a high-needs school in the United States felt that the mentoring relationship not only had an impact on them during the professional placement, but it also influenced their professional development and the type of teacher they wanted to become (Garza, Reynosa, Werner, Duchaine, & Harter, 2019). Based on their review of international research, Hobson et al. (2009) cited diverse benefits of mentoring for beginning teachers, including increased confidence and self-esteem, improved problem-solving capacities, and increased job satisfaction, as well as the significant role played by mentors in the socialization of beginning teachers.

The practicum can be a challenging experience filled with doubt and uncertainty for pre-service teachers, even impacting on their intention to pursue a teaching career (Allen, 2009; Morrison, 2014). Mentor teachers have been found to offer the support that pre-service teachers need during their practicum experience (Brown et al., 2015; Caires, Almeida & Vieira, 2012; Moulding, Stewart & Dunmeyer, 2014). For example, Moulding, Stewart and Dunmeyer (2014) found significant correlations between pre-service teachers' perceptions of support by mentor teachers and sense of efficacy scores during their professional placement. Likewise, drawing on surveys completed by 71 pre-service teachers from a large public university in the United States both before and after their professional placement, Brown, Lee and Collins (2015) found there was an increased sense of self-efficacy and preparedness to teach after completion of their practicum. In their qualitative responses as part of this mixed methods study, the pre-service teachers elaborated that their relationship with mentor teachers, as well as opportunities for hands-on teaching, and observation of experienced teachers during their practicum 'proved invaluable in their teacher preparation' (Brown, Lee & Collins, 2015, p. 86). Positive mentoring relationships have also been found to enhance feelings of competence (Le Cornu, 2009; Lindgren, 2005), reduce stress (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011) and build resilience and well-being (Brown et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010; Kutsyuruba, Godden & Bosica, 2019; Squires, 2019). It might well be argued therefore that mentor teachers play a significant role in preparing pre-service teachers to meet the challenges of the teaching profession.

As an aim in preparing pre-service teachers from Western Sydney University is that they not only survive their professional placements but can also thrive as teachers in disadvantaged school contexts, it may be questioned what impact experienced mentor teachers may have on pre-service teachers during placement in disadvantaged school contexts. In their qualitative study focusing on the perceptions held by pre-service teachers about teaching in culturally responsive classrooms in the United States, Lambeth and Smith (2016) found that rather than merely understanding *why* they needed to accept difference, these pre-service teachers wanted to learn *how* to work with culturally diverse students (p.51). It may be contended that the way in which mentors deal with the 'uncertainty associated with the complexity of practice' (Mena, Hennison & Loughran, 2017, p. 48) influences how pre-service teachers feel they can cope in a similar situation (Knoblauch & Woolfolk Hoy, 2008). For example, teachers from low socio-economic status (SES) school communities that participated in the Fair Go research project in Australia viewed challenges as opportunities to develop and refine pedagogies in the classroom (Munns, Hatton, & Gilbert, 2013). In contrast, mentors' limited and limiting practices as well as their unwillingness to value alternative approaches were identified by pre-service teachers who participated in 'The culturally responsive school project' as the most significant barriers to enacting culturally responsive efforts during their professional placements (Vass, 2017). It may be contended that the way mentor teachers deal with the complexity associated with teaching in disadvantaged school contexts will also influence

what sort of impact they have on pre-service teachers. Exploring the perceptions held by mentor teachers can lead to a deeper understanding of the impact they may have on pre-service teachers, and it can also result in greater collaboration between universities and schools as they work together to prepare quality teachers for disadvantaged school contexts.

Therefore, this paper explores the perceptions held by mentor teachers in schools that are school partners in the NETDS program at Western Sydney University. There are few published studies that have explored the views of school mentors who work in disadvantaged school contexts. This study explored the following question: "In what ways do mentor teachers perceive they can most effectively support pre-service teachers during their professional placements, and help prepare them to teach in disadvantaged school contexts?"

2. Theoretical framework

Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2008) work, this paper explores mentoring in disadvantaged school contexts from a social justice perspective. Central to Fraser's (2008) conceptualisation of social justice is 'parity of participation', which relates to permitting 'all to participate as peers in social life' (p.16). According to Fraser (2008), overcoming social injustice includes dismantling institutionalized barriers that inhibit some people from being able to participate 'on a par with others as full partners in social interactions' (p.16). These obstacles include economic structures that deny access to resources, institutional hierarchies of cultural value that deny equality, and governance structures that hinder democratic participation (Fraser, 2008; Scholes et al., 2017; Tikly & Barrett, 2011).

In response to these barriers, Fraser (2005, 2008a, 2010) proposes a three-dimensional theory of social justice, namely redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural) and representation (political). Firstly, redistribution relates to access to resources, without being impeded by contextual factors (Keddie, 2012; Scholes et al., 2017; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). The second of Fraser's dimensions redresses social misrecognition through the identification and acknowledgement of historically marginalized groups within specific contexts (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). This paper adopts Fraser's (2000) reconceptualization of recognition as an issue of status. The status model links recognition claims to the 'normative standard of participatory parity' (Fraser, 2004, p. 377), which avoids essentializing group difference. Thirdly, representation involves connections between social justice and public policy, which includes the rights of individuals and groups to 'have a voice' and to participate actively in decision making (Tikly & Barrett, 2011, p. 6). Fraser (2008) considers this final dimension is a pre-requisite for addressing issues of redistribution and recognition. There is a complexity underpinning this theory, due to the inter-relatedness of the three dimensions, with each reciprocally reinforcing and influencing the others, but none being reducible to the other (Scholes et al., 2017). For example, distribution does not relate solely to economics, as it is also informed and shaped by cultural recognition and political representation (Keddie, 2012).

Fraser's theory is a useful lens for identifying and addressing different dimensions of injustice within the field of education. For example, it has been used as a critical framework when considering the quality of education experienced by disadvantaged learners in low income countries (Tikly & Barrett, 2011), effective educational leadership in Papua New Guinea (Brownlee, Scholes, Farrell, Davis, & Cook, 2012); critical adult education (Huttunen, 2007); the injustice of league tables (Power & Frantji, 2010); and issues of student cultural diversity (Keddie, 2012, 2014). Keddie (2012), for instance, asserts that the valuing of students who are marginalized,

such as through the creation of culturally inclusive and relevant learning environments as well as giving them equal voice in democratic decision making, reflects the potential to 'destabilise the dominant social patterns that create inequitable status hierarchies' (p.269). Fraser's framework has also been used to focus on injustices experienced by marginalized students in low income schools in the United States (Cochran-Smith & Villegar, 2016), as well as in alternative education programs in Australia (Naidoo, 2012; Mills, McGregor, Baroutsis, Te Riele, & Hayes, 2016).

Using Fraser's three dimensional theory to focus on quality teaching for social justice, Scholes, Lampert, Burnett, Comber, Hoff and Ferguson (2017) propose the NETDS program as one way to prepare pre-service teachers for work in disadvantaged schools. They explain that providing access to a quality education, plus the outcomes arising from this, are central to disrupting the established link between poverty, poor academic performance, early school leaving, and future social and economic marginalization (Scholes et al., 2017). In response to their call for further research into 'what constitutes quality teaching for social justice in high poverty schools' (Scholes et al., 2017, p. 36), this paper offers insights about mentoring in disadvantaged school contexts from a social justice perspective. By exploring the perceptions from mentors with experience teaching in disadvantaged school contexts in Western Sydney, and using Fraser's theoretical framework, it was possible to gain a contextualised understanding of the impact that these mentor teachers feel they can have on pre-service teachers during their professional placements in disadvantaged school contexts.

3. Methodology

The data was drawn from a qualitative study exploring the perceptions held by nine mentor teachers about how they feel they can most effectively support pre-service teachers during their professional placement and prepare them for teaching in disadvantaged school contexts.

There is an emphasis in qualitative research on people's lived experiences because this is where 'individual belief and action intersect with culture' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 9). As individuals' interpretations or 'perceptions' of experiences are influenced by the 'context in which they reside' (Munhall, 2012, p. 607), the views of mentors teaching in disadvantaged schools offer insights into their perspectives about the mentoring relationship and how they feel they can most effectively support and prepare pre-service teachers for such contexts. Although the concept of social desirability (Callegaro, 2011, p. 826) cannot be overlooked, for the mentors in this study may have sought to present themselves in a favourable light; the converging views emanating from individual interviews with participants offer confidence in the study's findings. The next phase of the research comprises interviews with pre-service teachers, exploring their perceptions about what they find supportive or otherwise in the mentoring relationship. However, this paper focuses specifically on the perceptions held by mentor teachers about the impact they feel they can have through the mentoring relationship with pre-service teachers during the professional placement in disadvantaged school contexts. Their insights will be used to further strengthen the collaborative efforts between Western Sydney University and the schools partnering in the NETDS program.

3.1. Participants

Nine mentor teachers with teaching experience ranging from three to twenty or more years participated in this study. These mentors are currently teaching in four New South Wales secondary schools, which may be categorized as 'disadvantaged' based on

their schools' socio-educational circumstances (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). Each of these schools has an ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) below 1000. These secondary schools were part of the NETDS program, and part of a competitive Western Sydney University School of Education seed grant research project conducted and completed in 2019.

As there has been limited research conducted in Western Sydney focusing on the perceptions of mentors teaching in low SES contexts, this study offers examples of how mentors feel they can effectively support pre-service teachers during their professional placement and prepare them for teaching in disadvantaged school contexts. However, difficulties gaining access to teachers, as well as concerns about disruptions to school schedules had an impact on this study's sample size, and meant that it was not feasible to conduct focus groups in addition to individual interviews. Having such a small sample does not permit generalisations to be made but it could act as an impetus for further research.

Approval for this study and the consent procedures was granted by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee, and the New South Wales Department of Education. Pseudonyms were given for all mentor teachers who participated in this study.

3.2. Data collection

Qualitative, semi-structured, individual interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) were conducted with nine mentor teachers. These mentors initially completed a short survey containing twelve closed questions about the impact of mentors on pre-service teachers during professional placement. Based on their responses, it was determined that interviews would enable a deeper exploration of their insights. This paper will focus on the interview data only.

Participants were interviewed once, and interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes each. The ten questions which were used as a guide for these semi-structured interviews were formulated based on responses drawn from pre-self-efficacy surveys that all NETDS pre-service teachers complete upon entering the program at Western Sydney University. Interviews included discussions about the mentor teacher's perceptions about their role and responsibilities as a mentor teacher, specifically in a disadvantaged school context, as well as how they felt they could be of benefit through the mentoring relationship to a pre-service teacher. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.3. Data analysis

Data from each interview was analysed using a 'constant comparative method' of data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 32). Although initially proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a means of developing grounded theory, this method, which is an inductive and comparative form of data analysis, is now frequently used to generate findings in diverse qualitative studies (Charmaz, 2014). In this study, analysis involved systematically reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, so that codes could be drawn inductively from the raw data. After coding was completed, a number of categories were identified as commonalities between the codes were detected and similar codes were combined. Thereafter, relationships between these categories were identified and they were drawn into themes. There was a constant return to the transcripts and reviewing of the relationships between categories and themes to ensure integrity of the themes. Themes were refined through a process of identifying what was of importance in the coded data. Three main themes were detectable in the data, and

Table 1
Thematic Analysis – Theme development from code through categories.

Code	Category	Theme
Background knowledge of students/community	Contextual awareness	Sharpening pre-service teachers' understanding of the impact of disadvantage
Rapport with students	Philosophy of teaching	Offering opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop as teachers
Empathy/Non-judgemental attitude		
Holistic approach	Developing teaching skills/attitudes	Offering opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop as teachers
Focus on transformation		
Having high expectations		
Observing exemplary practice	Preparation for teaching profession	Providing support through the mentoring relationship
Gaining practical experience		
Content knowledge		
Classroom management		
Flexibility/Adaptability	Academic support	Providing support through the mentoring relationship
Non-teaching roles/Expectations		
Awareness of school policies	Emotional support	Providing support through the mentoring relationship
Socialization/Collegiality		
Feedback	Emotional support	Providing support through the mentoring relationship
Help with lesson preparation		
Reflection/Lifelong learning		
Well-being of teacher		
Resilience		

Table 1 presents the process of theme development from code through categories:

4. Findings and discussion

Focusing on perceptions held by mentor teachers drawn from their interview responses, three main themes emerged about how they feel they can have an impact on pre-service teachers during their professional placement in disadvantaged school contexts, namely by: (a) sharpening pre-service teachers' understanding of the impact of disadvantage, (b) offering opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop as teachers, and (c) providing support through the mentoring relationship.

4.1. Sharpening pre-service teachers' understanding of the impact of disadvantage

Underpinning the teaching philosophy of mentors in the current study was an awareness that education has the power to transform lives. For example, when explaining her motivation for teaching, Emma¹ stated:

... I am largely motivated by a desire to make a difference in my students' lives and I am passionate about giving all of my students a fair go, irrespective of what socio-economic background, race, nationality or religion that they come from. I am passionate about my teaching and I know the difference that it can make to my students' lives (Emma).

In order to give all students '*a fair go*', it was highlighted by mentors that pre-service teachers undertaking placements in disadvantaged school contexts need to understand structural inequalities, such as generational poverty, that have an impact on students and communities in these areas. This involves an identification and acknowledgement of historically marginalized groups within schooling contexts. However, for some pre-service teachers, a placement in a disadvantaged school may be a totally different experience than anything they are familiar with. Reflecting on personal experience, Sam alluded to the difficulties associated with

understanding the complexities of vulnerable communities:

I didn't have significant trauma. I didn't have all the baggage that comes with a lot of these kids ... It's hard to get in their shoes (Sam).

Through their experience as teachers in disadvantaged school contexts, the mentor teachers felt they can play an important role in assisting pre-service teachers' understanding of disadvantaged school communities. For example, Emma explained:

I recognise that this is one way that I am able to help form, shape and influence the very people who will be caring for the very students that I say I care about (Emma).

There was, however, an underlying expectation expressed by mentors that pre-service teachers need to be self-reflective about their own cultural positioning. Referring to pre-service teachers who '*may not come from the types of areas we're catering for*', Brianna highlighted the challenge of:

... changing your way of thinking from what your own experience was to what it is for students (Brianna).

Rather than stereotyping or simplifying issues experienced by marginalized students, mentor teachers in this study indicated a need for pre-service teachers to value the complexity of their students' lives. Quality teaching for social justice, from Fraser's (2000) status model of recognition perspective, requires not only the identification and acknowledgement of marginalized groups, but also an appreciation for intra-group diversity. For example, rather than holding pre-conceived assumptions, such as '*about what these kids are able to do and what they think and how they spend their time*' (Emma), the mentors felt that teachers need to get to know their students. As Sam explained, this includes building connections with students and taking an interest in their lives:

... you have to build rapport but it's not rapport of being like their best friend in the whole, entire world. It's being someone that they can trust (Sam).

In addition, Brianna asserted that empathy and a non-judgemental attitude are required when working with students

¹ Please note pseudonyms have been used for all mentors in this study (please refer to section 3.1).

from disadvantaged contexts because

... a lot of them have had experience with things going wrong ... or people giving up on them. So that's just what they revert to (Brianna).

Therefore, Emma felt that pre-service teachers should

... come with an open mind and be willing to ... show an eagerness to learn ... show some patience to work and to give these students time to achieve their outcomes (Emma).

The mentors in this study emphasized the need for teachers to not only recognise the impact of contextual factors in disadvantaged school contexts, but also to value students for who they are. Such an awareness allows for a 'range of possibilities' dependent on what is needed for the students to 'participate as peers in social life' (Fraser, 2008a, p.137). Although Fraser (2008) typically relates the dimension of representation to political systems, the responses indicate that by sharpening pre-service teachers' understanding of the impact of disadvantage, the mentor teachers are indirectly being a voice for students in disadvantaged school contexts.

The mentor teachers' desire to maximise the capacity of these students to access the potential outcomes of a quality education is also evidenced through their emphasis on holding high expectations for the students and not 'watering down' the lesson content (Lampert & Burnett, 2014, p. 8). By rejecting deficit and compensatory teaching approaches, these mentor teachers therefore advocate teaching the academic skills and competence that their students will need to succeed in mainstream society (Keddie, 2012; Mills & Gale, 2010). For example, Emma explained:

I'm aware of the difficulties but I wouldn't allow that to become an excuse for them not achieving. In my classroom I maintain high expectations, encourage risk taking with a view that mistakes are steps in themselves to achieving success (Emma).

The responses from the mentor teachers in this study indicate they have grappled with what Fraser (2008) terms 'parity of participation'. Linked to their awareness of contextual challenges is a conviction that with support these students can achieve on the 'same measuring sticks of educational achievement as their more privileged counterparts' (Keddie, 2012, p. 270). This not only influences their own teaching approach, but it can also shape the practices and strategies that pre-service teachers adopt. As Jane contends, when teaching students in disadvantaged contexts it is imperative for pre-service teachers to '*understand the needs and how to actually move them from where they are to where they can be*'.

Emphasizing the importance of context, this paper will therefore highlight how mentor teachers feel they can most effectively prepare pre-service teachers for teaching in disadvantaged school contexts, by offering opportunities for them to develop as teachers, as well as by providing them with support and guidance through the mentoring relationship.

4.2. Offering opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop as teachers

Pre-service teachers, such as those in the NETDS program, have had time to reflect on issues they may encounter during their professional placement as well as develop an awareness of the impact of poverty on students' educational opportunities. However, the mentor teachers in this study recognised that, regardless of prior preparation, pre-service teachers undertaking their

professional placement in disadvantaged school contexts will experience specific challenges. For example, Emma likened the practicum experience to:

... a smelting furnace. Where you've got gold or metal [laugh] that constantly has to be put through fire and shaped ... Prac teachers are also subjected to a lot of intense difficulties and challenges and growth. It's all sort of intensified in the one moment, and all those experiences help to shape them. At the end of the process, they come out stronger and more wholesome and refined (Emma).

As part of this 'shaping' process, pre-service teachers can observe how their mentors cope in challenging situations. It has been contended that observation of a mentor's 'successful' teaching practice and behaviour can build a pre-service teachers' sense of efficacy regardless of the school context (Moulding, Stewart & Dunmeyer, 2014, p. 62), because observation of another person's ability to handle a specific action can strengthen the 'observer's self-efficacy to perform a similar action at the same level' (Martins, Costa, & Onofre, 2015, p.264). Jane highlighted the value of observation, as she feels it can help develop the pre-service teachers' confidence that they will also be able to succeed in similar situations:

I think what your pre-service teacher sees in you as a mentor will impact on what kind of teacher they become ... when they can see you as a mentor teacher, who is able to deliver a lesson, plan a lesson, have a good rapport, build relationship with the students, the parents, the teachers, community ... You can't change people's habits. But ... I think you can get them to build and work towards being that great teacher that they're capable of (Jane).

This emphasises Jane's conviction that becoming a teacher in a disadvantaged school context requires effort and determination, but she also has confidence that her pre-service teachers can put into practice some of the insights they have gleaned through observation.

Developing confidence in classroom management and practices, especially in challenging contexts, is another component in the pre-service teacher's learning curve during their professional placement. Observation of how mentors effectively deal with challenging students can, for instance, provide insights that benefit pre-service teachers as they prepare to teach in disadvantaged school contexts. For example, Daniel explained:

They can see if it's a very disruptive class towards the end, how am I reacting to that ... I think that they learn from that as well, they take all those things on board (Daniel).

At the same time, it was also highlighted that pre-service teachers need to be able to personally handle challenging classroom behaviour. For example, Georgia explained:

... you're not going to have a mentor teacher in the classroom with you. You're by yourself. So, you need to be prepared and you only prepare someone by allowing this person to deal with this situation, to go through (Georgia).

These comments highlight that the redistribution of high quality teachers to disadvantaged schools is only the first step in breaking the cycle of 'placing the least experienced teachers with the most needy students' (Grossman & Loeb, 2010, p. 22). Mentor teachers

can also play an instrumental role in helping prepare teachers who can make a long-term difference in disadvantaged school contexts.

It was felt that by providing a supportive environment where pre-service teachers are encouraged to make decisions and develop their own teaching styles, mentor teachers are demonstrating their confidence that these sort of teaching experiences will help to shape the pre-service teachers so that they can be effective in disadvantaged school contexts. For example, rather than imposing their teaching style or practice, the mentors in this study displayed an openness to granting their pre-service teachers an 'appropriate degree of autonomy' (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009), as Simon explained:

The way that you teach is going to be very unique to you and it's going to be the best glove that you've ever worn in your life. It's got to fit well and if I'm just being there and teaching them how to be me, then that's not going to be very great (Simon).

Teaching in disadvantaged school contexts, from a redistributive perspective (Fraser, 2008), requires a sound knowledge and skills in curriculum and pedagogy in order to deal with contextual factors. As the mastery of specific teaching skills and strategies does not equate to competence in all contexts, mentor teachers can play an important role in helping pre-service teachers to 'better understand their teacher selves' (Scholes et al., 2017, p. 35). For example, Daniel explained that some pre-service teachers need to learn that teaching involves more than simply preparing the content:

... they come with a notion that this is what I'm teaching ... I'm going to put it on the board and then they're going to listen and it's going to be absorbed. It's not, so they have to weave their way, it's like a maze, big maze. Then sometimes they get demotivated as well, that I planned all this and the students, they were not even interested in that. So, they have to use different strategies depending on the type of the class, but still achieve the outcomes in whatever way. (Daniel).

If marginalized students are going to have access to a quality education, the mentors stressed that pre-service teachers need to be able to adapt the content to make it relevant and achievable for the students. At the same time, they have to avoid the temptation to water down the content to make it easier for the students, which would further perpetuate disadvantage. Referred to as a 'redistribution of resources' (Scholes et al., 2017, p. 32), the ability to make adaptations in response to contextual constraints while maintaining a focus on high academic outcomes is a challenging but essential requirement that pre-service teachers in disadvantaged schools need to develop. Stephen, for example, explained that when teaching '*the more challenging classes*', there was a need for flexibility which he described as '*that ability to move with the group that's with them and work together to be successful*'. Similarly, Jane emphasized that '*it's not always going to go to plan and it's not that it's a waste of effort on your part*'. This may necessitate, for instance, making sure to '*have plan B*' (Daniel) or to '*teach the same content in five different ways to make sure that the students are getting the best out of it*' (Sam). Therefore, rather than adopting a dogmatic approach, Stephen highlighted the benefit for pre-service teachers to:

... listen to others, try different things. So, that ability to take on information and then ... be flexible in implementing those lessons (Stephen).

A considerable portion of everyday school life involves collaboration between staff to optimize student learning. A recognition by the mentors in this study that quality teaching is a 'collective labour' (Scholes et al., 2017, p. 22), was evident in that although different teachers may adopt different teaching approaches, their aim is to effectively teach marginalized students. For example, Stephen explained:

... show them that this is a method or one of many methods to deal with the varying situations or settings that we've got in teaching. Take what you need, move on, use someone else's method, use different methods, use new methods that you've ... seen in teaching (Stephen).

Drawing on their own professional experience, mentor teachers can also provide a realistic picture of what it is like to be a teacher and specifically what it is like to work in a disadvantaged school. This includes helping pre-service teachers develop an awareness of school policies and procedures, as well as helping them adapt to the expectations, norms and standards of the teaching profession generally, as well as specific school contexts. For example, Brianna explained:

The organization, the meetings, all these things that, I guess you are aware of as a pre-service teacher but it's not until you're actually doing them and in a role of a full-time teacher how much, how large it is ... So whilst you're also a classroom teacher, you're also somewhat a counsellor and all these other roles into one. (Brianna).

Likewise, Emma highlighted that '*the mentor teacher is a person that knows about the processes, the school systems, how things operate*', and they can therefore act as an information source about school and department policies for the pre-service teacher during their professional placement. Mentors therefore play a significant role in the socialization of pre-service teachers into the teaching profession.

Although the eight pre-service teachers in Izadinia's (2016) study focusing on mentors' and pre-service teachers' perceptions and expectations of a mentoring relationship did not consider an understanding of school life was as important to them as the mentors' emotional and academic support during the professional placement, especially because they were only at the initial stages of their teacher training; it may be contended that such an awareness may be more relevant when there is a professional placement in a disadvantaged school context. By fostering opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn about school policies and to get to know other staff members in the school, the mentor teachers in this study are emphasizing that pre-service teachers do not have to cope alone with challenges or difficulties they may encounter. In addition, by modelling the benefits of collaboration, the mentor can help the pre-service teacher to develop a 'growing sense of belonging' (Caires et al., 2012, p. 172) and acceptance within the disadvantaged school community. Offering pre-service teachers a positive appreciation for the opportunities within a disadvantaged school may impact their willingness to continue their journey as a teacher in such a context and to navigate their way through the school culture.

4.3. Providing support through the mentoring relationship

The practical component of learning to teach provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop in their role as teachers, while exploring teaching as a career choice. It can also offer pre-service teachers an opportunity to learn from teachers who have experience working in disadvantaged school contexts. For example, Brianna felt that the professional placement helps bridge the gap between what pre-service teachers are learning through the NETDS program and what they will face when they start teaching as a profession, by giving them *'the confidence to apply what they've been learning at university into a classroom setting'*.

From a social justice perspective, Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) depicted mentoring as a relationship in which the mentor provides pre-service teachers with supportive, but challenging opportunities so that they can develop professionally through reflective practices. This explanation, however, does not provide details as to whether there is 'parity of participation' (Fraser, 2008) between the mentor teacher and the pre-service teacher. By exploring what the mentors in this study perceive are parity-fostering factors within the mentoring relationship with pre-service teachers, it has therefore been possible to develop deeper insights about the mentoring relationship.

The mentor teachers in this study highlighted the importance of developing a positive mentoring relationship with pre-service teachers. This was evident, for example, in Emma's response:

I think that my identity as a mentor teacher is of tremendous importance. How I see myself, how I carry myself, the kind of teacher that I am and the way I am a role model definitely has a huge impact on pre-service teachers and how they see themselves as well too ... if I choose to be negative, have a negative mentoring relationship, the sort of words that I say might restrict their freedom to explore and to try new things. But at the same time if I'm positive, then I could be helping them to grow and to uplift themselves more (Emma).

Mentor responses indicated that a concern for fairness within the mentoring relationship entails a consideration of the impact of each person's attitudes and actions on the other person. It was felt that empathy plays a vital role in the mentoring relationship. For example, when describing the challenges pre-service teachers experience when undertaking their professional placement in disadvantaged school contexts, Georgia explained that it can be *'really challenging because our pre-service teachers are not prepared for all this, a routine that is not a routine at all'*. In addition, Emma stated that there needs to be mutual respect and a willingness to learn from each other in order to foster a *'relationship of respect and trust and transparency'* to:

... make pre-service teachers feel safe and valued so that they are able to discover their why as to why they have chosen teaching ... I want to be able to help them find themselves as teachers, not me make replicas of myself as a teacher (Emma).

The provision of academic support by the mentors was suggested as another way they could help pre-service teachers during the professional placement. Emma contended that it may be expected that mentors are experts *'in their knowledge in their particular field and in their teaching strategies'* and should therefore be able to provide academic support for the pre-service teachers. Jane, Joanne and Sam also referred to the sharing of teaching resources as a means of support. For example, Jane described helping the pre-service teacher with lesson planning and specifically giving

suggestions *'on what can make a better lesson'*. In addition, Simon suggested that providing the pre-service teacher with information about backgrounds and plans for different students can help the pre-service teacher to deliver an engaging lesson that is more relevant to the needs of the students. Similarly, Georgia asserted that mentors can assist pre-service teachers by giving

... some guidance for the situations that are happening here in our schools now and expect that they can with time apply or modify them accordingly (Georgia)

Mentors also highlighted the significance of providing feedback for pre-service teachers during the professional placement. They felt that feedback provides an opportunity for them to impart confidence at times when the pre-service teacher may be dealing with self-doubt and uncertainty. For example, Stephen explained:

... to see that there are successes within what's perceived as a negative is going to help them along that journey of building confidence, building that capacity. That they do have the ability to do this job and do it well. (Stephen).

The mentors felt that it was preferable to notice and nurture effective teaching behaviours, rather than seek to highlight every weakness and to fix all problems. Jane, for instance, felt that this approach helped to create a positive relationship, and encouraged the pre-service teachers to feel free to try out new strategies and take the initiative, without fear of failure. This attitude increases the potential for professional growth, self-reflection and problem solving capacity whilst increasing self-esteem, morale and sense of identity. It further recognizes that the pre-service teacher can contribute to student learning through a greater sense of inclusion in the teaching and learning process. It also suggests a non-hierarchical relationship in which the mentor's focus is on preparing potential teaching colleagues, thus acknowledging and appreciating the knowledge that pre-service teachers bring to their classrooms. For example, Emma explained:

... it's important that I'm there to guide and to facilitate but never ever to impose on them, nor to make them feel judged. I want to be able to provide a safe spot for them to fail if need be, but to be able to pick up and move on. So, I think that the way that I mentor them is going to determine whether or not they are able to find their true teaching styles and so on. I don't want to shelter them in terms of the teaching experience, but at the same time let them discover it for themselves. (Emma).

At the same time, Sam contended that feedback should not only be *'supportive but also be honest'*. The mentors felt that by offering well-timed, constructive, and clear feedback, the pre-service teacher can learn and develop. For example, Simon explained:

I like the idea of focusing on what can be improved rather than just saying that was good (Simon).

These responses suggest confidence that the pre-service teacher is capable of handling difficult situations by exercising an appropriate degree of autonomy so that they can develop their own approach to teaching. For example, Brianna explained that she can support pre-service teachers to realize that negative comments from students do not need to be taken personally, or that:

A bad lesson or a bad something that happens doesn't define you as a teacher. It's about how you then pick up and learn from it and move forward (Brianna).

The mentors stressed the need for both teachers and students to develop a passion for lifelong learning. As Daniel explained, a growth mindset 'has to come from the teachers in this school'. Therefore, through constructive feedback, mentors felt that they can challenge pre-service teachers to critically reflect about their practice, while encouraging them to persevere in order to be successful. As feedback can create a desire to learn from mistakes, Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2010) have described it as a win-learn experience. This focus on supporting the pre-service teacher's growth aligns with the need for 'high academic expectations and pedagogic demandingness' in teaching (Keddie, 2012, p. 272). It also highlights that these mentors want the pre-service teachers to succeed in the teaching profession.

There are obvious ways in which mentors provide support during the professional placement, such as through the provision of teaching resources, but there are also invisible processes at work (Dahl, Stolz & Willig, 2004). For example, providing a positive mentoring relationship in which the pre-service teacher feels safe to take risks during the practicum will, as Emma stated, 'help to shape them' so that 'they come out stronger'. The mentor teacher, therefore, can also play a vital role in supporting the pre-service teacher's emotional well-being throughout the practicum. In order to overcome the contextual challenges that they will experience during their professional placements, pre-service teachers need to be resilient. However, resilience is not innate (Day & Hong, 2016), and therefore the support from their mentor can help boost their resolve to persevere even if they experience challenges. For example, Jane referred to helping pre-service teachers by being alert to 'signs because not everybody will share with you', and also 'asking questions and making them feel like it's not the end of the world'.

5. Conclusion

Although the coursework component of the NETDS program offers pre-service teachers at Western Sydney University an opportunity to gain a broad understanding of systemic inequities as well as of the cultural and socio-economic contexts shaping disadvantage (Burnett & Lampert, 2016; Lampert & Burnett, 2014, 2016), professional placements provide authentic experiences where they can implement equitable practices. By being deliberately positioned in a disadvantaged school, pre-service teachers can learn firsthand what teaching for social justice entails and this in turn leads to professional insights.

This article has explored the perceptions of nine mentors who are currently teaching in disadvantaged schools that are partnering in the NETDS program at Western Sydney University. Their views offer insights into how they feel they can most effectively support pre-service teachers during their professional placements in preparation for teaching in disadvantaged school contexts. Whereas it may be hoped that most mentor teachers aim to provide support, and offer opportunities for pre-service teachers' professional development, the mentors in this study emphasized that in addition to these dual aims, being mindful about the impact of contextual factors influences how they teach and how they mentor.

Drawing on Fraser's (2008) three dimensions of social justice as a lens to explore the perceptions of these mentors, this paper contends that socially just education is shaped by a concern for economic (redistribution), cultural (recognition) and political justice (representation). In this study, mentors emphasized that teaching in disadvantaged school contexts involves a recognition of the students, taking into consideration their diverse backgrounds and life experiences, as well as a belief that these students should have access to a quality education without being hindered by

contextual factors. Acting somewhat as an indirect voice for their students, the mentors in this study stressed that students in disadvantaged school contexts deserve quality teachers who have a sound content knowledge and who are able to adapt to meet the needs of the students.

These mentors felt that mentoring provides them with an opportunity to, as Emma persuasively explained: 'help form, shape and influence the very people who will be caring for the very students that I say I care about'. Therefore, opportunities during the practicum for the pre-service teachers to observe exemplary teaching and to develop their own teaching style were considered to be part of this shaping process. This desire to prepare teachers who are committed to social justice (Burnett & Lampert, 2011) and want to make a difference in disadvantaged school contexts was also evident in mentor responses about the support they offer pre-service teachers. Their support was focused on building capacity and a growth mindset, encouraging collaboration with other teachers, and giving the pre-service teachers the freedom to learn from their mistakes.

Well-prepared mentor teachers working in a supportive enabling learning environment have the potential to impact pre-service teacher development. By developing a sense of belonging in pre-service teachers, mentors foster an opportunity for pre-service teachers to contribute to the school and its community. Through collegial inquiry and innovation, mentor teachers reinforce capacity building, confidence and a sense of capability in pre-service teachers that ultimately deepens the professional learning both now and into the future. Pre-service teachers can thereby learn not only how to survive their professional placement, but also how to thrive as teachers in disadvantaged school contexts.

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