Within the education system, the most important lever to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students is outstanding teachers.1

The reality however, is that kids who need great teachers the most, are the least likely to get them and keep them. Teacher graduates in the top quartile of academic test scores are far less likely to accept positions in Low SES schools. And because Low SES schools can be challenging environments, these teachers are retained for much shorter periods of time.

The Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (ETDS) project tackles this issue head on by creating a pathway for the highest quality pre-service teachers to be fully prepared for their roles within Low SES schools.

How does it work?

1. Identifying the cohort: Academic results are used as a starting point for selection. Other factors (knowledge, skills, disposition, life experiences, and willingness to teach in Low SES schools) are also used to recruit ideal candidates.

2. Modifying the curriculum: In their third year of studies, participants in ETDS undertake a socio-cultural foundation unit where they participate as a separate cohort with a specific focus on disadvantage and schooling.

3. Gaining field experience: ETDS pre-service teachers are placed in Low SES schools (who are formal partners in the project). They are amply supported through the process, with each allocated a participating mentor or supervising teacher.

4. Placement: Together with government and partner schools, ETDS helps to place the graduates within schools that need them.

5. Longitudinal tracking of progress: Data is being collected in order to refine approaches and to develop an even more effective curriculum to prepare ETDS teachers.

Jo Lampert and Bruce Burnett founded the ETDS project at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2008. SVA believes that the ETDS project is a “Bright Spot” that creates outstanding outcomes for kids in disadvantaged communities. SVA worked with QUT to create the National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS) project. SVA acted as a catalyst and enabler by developing a plan to replicate the approach in 6 more Australian universities and helping to secure funding to support the project. Origin Foundation have made a major commitment of strategic funding to support the national roll out of ETDS over 3.5 years.

“If I hadn’t had the ETDS experience my placement probably would have broken me because I wouldn’t have been used to the level or the behaviour management of the kids and just the low literacy and numeracy and all that goes with it.”

ETDS Graduate

“I don’t think I would even consider coming to this school if it were not for ETDS. I would probably have ended up in some private school. ETDS showed me teaching here is more rewarding because it’s challenging.”

ETDS Graduate
Progress to date
Over the last four years, ETDS has engaged three cohorts of high achieving teacher education students who have been invited to participate in the program. The first QUT ETDS cohort graduated in 2011 – all with First Class Honours (two being University Medallists).

Of this cohort, 17 of 18 secured full-time teaching positions and all but three are currently employed in low-SES schools with ICSEA scores of less than 1000. The second ETDS cohort has seen 22 of 25 employed as teachers in their first year after graduation, with 91% working in schools with ICSEA scores less than 1,000. The third cohort entered the program in 2012 and undertook their first low-SES based practicum in October 2013. ETDS has formed active partnerships with 39 schools across Queensland and this list continues to grow.

Where to next?
Over the past three years, the ETDS project has worked with over 100 education students, gathering data on their experiences.

The ETDS team, with the support of SVA, is now engaging with other universities to share their learning and to support others who want to lead programs focused on developing exceptional teachers for disadvantaged schools. The objective is to establish a virtuous cycle of greater scale leading to more data – and then using that data to generate further evidence-based programs. The vision is to see universities across Australia working together to get more exceptional teachers in front of the kids that need them most.

The University of New England and the University of Newcastle have begun rolling out the program.

SVA support
SVA is working with QUT to:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Expand ETDS to 6 more universities, graduating 210 exceptional teachers for low SES schools
  \item Develop and extend mentoring support for graduates
  \item Create a knowledge network among partners and graduates that emphasises research, impact and outcomes
  \item Access ongoing funding to support the project
\end{itemize}

“Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. The ETDS graduates have absolute priority in terms of us selecting them for pre-service and in terms of employment.”
Deputy Principal

“… she could have gone to a multitude of leafy-green schools. She chose my school. Big call, tough call. All my teachers are nearly retiring and I need good graduates to take their place.”
Principal

“They are very good operators, they’re very confident and they’re very passionate about why they’re there. I’m very impressed with the program. I think it’s a fantastic idea. It’s definitely what these schools need. You can’t just grab any teacher and bring them into a school like this and say they’ll be successful because some of them won’t be. Look, I want more of them, so let’s keep bringing them here …”
Principal

1 Hattie (2003) demonstrated that teachers account for about 30% of variance in student achievement. Leigh (2010) found that a student taught by someone in the top 10% of Australian teachers can achieve in half a year what it would take a student with a teacher in the bottom 10% to achieve in a full year.