



Sunday Age
Sunday 7/02/2010

Page: 15
 Section: General News
 Region: Melbourne, AU
 Circulation: 226900
 Type: Capital City Daily
 Size: 1,381.51 sq.cms.



slice
 slicemedia.com

press clip

Fast learners

They're young and smart and they're being thrown into the classroom after six weeks of teacher training. **Natalie Craig** reports on a radical new experiment in our schools.

A TEENAGE boy sighs with exaggerated fatigue. Nearby, his classmate is throwing his pen high in the air, over and over again, at exact intervals. Outside, the playground is barren, the sky is dark, and the wind is stirring up dust and bits of dry grass. Inside is muggy.

"Sir, can we turn on the air-conditioner?" asks a girl.

"It is on," says her exasperated friend.

"Shut up!"

But "sir" is not distracted. He is as relentless as the pen-thrower.

"What's an example of a company that offers services? Come on, I want to hear some answers."

"Jim's Mowers 'n that," says one boy.

"Good . . . now, who can give me an example of a public organisation?"

"Schools," offers one girl. "McDonald's?" asks another.

That's why "sir", Shaun Isbister, is here in his first week teaching at Mill Park Secondary College, which crouches between barren hills dotted with estates on Melbourne's northern fringe. He is one of a new, experimental breed of teacher — a kind of educational evangelist sent to encourage kids to pick their heads up off the desk and get the

answers right.

Hardly an original mission for the teaching profession, but what is different about Isbister is the way he has been trained. An intelligent, intensely serious 23-year-old, he has a four-year degree with first-class honours in economics and commerce, and only six weeks of teacher training, completed this summer. He is the product of a new scheme, Teach for Australia, which is funded by the state and federal governments. The scheme's first 45 "associates", as they are known, started in Victorian schools last week.

The program borrows from Teach for America, which encourages graduates to postpone their plans for prosperous careers in corporate finance, law and medicine, to instead spend a few years teaching in some of the country's neediest schools. Founded in 1990, Teach for America has 17,000 teacher "alumni" and has spawned similar "teach for" programs in nine countries, including Britain, Germany, India, Argentina and Lebanon.

Australian teachers are both welcoming and wary. While understanding of the desire to "make a difference", some consider it an insult to their years of training and experience.

Isbister says most detractors

base their claims on misinformation. The initial intensive six-week course, conducted by the University of Melbourne, covered almost a third of the university's post-graduate teaching diploma, from how children learn to planning lessons. Like the other associates, Isbister will have about an 80 per cent teaching load and study part-time over two years for his teaching degree. He is also confident he has an edge over many other teachers when it comes to disadvantaged schools. He's been in one.

BOX Forest Secondary College in Glenroy suffered an incredible blow to its image in 2002 when a newspaper named it one of Melbourne's 20 most "under-achieving" schools, based on VCE results. The lack of morale rubbed off on Isbister, who was in year 10 at the time. "It wasn't just that, but it didn't help . . . most of the time, I'd just sit there with my huge Discman in my pocket listening to music."

One day, his business management teacher, Ian Cook, snapped. "Mr Cook kept me back after class and just gave me an absolute serve. There were profanities used. He just said: 'You're lazy and you distract others. Not only are



press clip

you wasting your potential, you're wasting theirs.'

"I walked out of that room after school in tears. I'd always had decent grades but never did anything to go beyond that. I don't know what it was, but I just turned everything around after that. Two months out from the VCE, I hashed out practice exam after practice exam. I would hand in 10 pages worth of writing and Mr Cook would return it with corrections the next day."

The hard work paid off. Isbister scored an ENTER of 93.6, one of the school's best results, and after graduating from university — the first in his family to do so — he landed a plum job as a business analyst. He rented a apartment near the city and took an expensive trip to Europe with his girlfriend, but returned to find his position no longer available because of the financial crisis. Fortunately, Teach for Australia came along.

Isbister says it was serendipity, rather than necessity, that made him apply, although a good mate is still making fun of him. "I said to him years ago that if I didn't enjoy doing what I was doing, I'd just become a teacher . . . never have I regretted words more than that . . . I actually have a really strong desire to be a teacher."

Nor does he regret moving back with his parents, four siblings, two nephews and his sister's partner, in government housing in Broadmeadows. He says he's keen to avoid the "rent trap", but admits there's probably a deeper motive for his thrift.

"When I was four years old there was a house fire that I accidentally caused . . . My brother was cooking dinner and was lighting the stove with the lighter and left it up there and I picked it up and lit a curtain.

"We had no insurance at all . . . I remember later on saying, 'Mum, I'm going to make something of myself so I can buy you a house'."

Teaching, as he is aware, is a long route to wealth. But Isbister says the TFA salary — about \$45,000 — makes the program much more attractive than paying thousands in fees to study full-time. The catch is that he must remain at Mill Park for two years. After that, he is free to return to a career in business, should he

choose to.

"Two years is good, because it gives people an opportunity to find out about themselves and see whether or not they actually want a career in this caper," he says. "Certainly, I plan to stay on."

'UNTRAINED and uncommitted" is the Australian Education Union's verdict of the Teach for Australia associates. While anxious not to denigrate the associates personally, president Angelo Gavrielatos says the idea that a graduate, however accomplished, can become a teacher in six weeks is an insult. "By no means do I want to take anything away from the associates, I wish them all the best," Gavrielatos said. "But this is sheer politics over policy . . . an attempt to grab headlines."

The state and federal governments will spend \$22 million on the scheme over four years. Divide that by 45 associates, and each costs 15 times what it costs to train an ordinary first-year undergraduate teacher, the union says. It's money it would rather see invested to improve teacher training and mentoring for all, not just a select few.

The union says policymakers have also neglected warnings from academics about the failures of the Teach for America scheme. It cites academics such as David Berliner, a Regents' Professor at Arizona State University, whose studies suggest the scheme is not effective in helping disadvantaged children learn.

"The bottom line for me is that in the US . . . in the first year, these teachers hurt the children they teach. More in reading than in math, but they do not help the children and they suffer greatly from their own inadequacies," Berliner says. The teachers start to improve in their second and third years, he says, but most don't stay in teaching beyond the second year, "so they do harm and then they leave".

Teach for Australia rejects criticism of the US program, citing a 2007 study by the Calder Centre, a Florida think-tank specialising in educational studies, which found "TFA teachers, on average, have a positive effect on high school test scores relative to non-TFA teachers". Opinion, overall, is divided, but many analyses involve primary students in the US, whereas

the Australian version is confined to secondary schools.

Melodie Potts, the American-born chief executive of Teach for Australia, says the union's attack on its funding is flawed, as it doesn't account for establishment costs, and the fact that the money is likely to be spread across hundreds of associates, with the aim to increase their numbers as much as threefold by 2011.

Potts says the scheme is also one manifestation of a "new pathway" into teaching.

Professor Field Rickards, dean of education at the University of Melbourne, agrees. He says Teach for Australia, like the university's new Master of Teaching, treats the profession like a clinical practice, such as nursing, and melds theory and practice early.

"Traditionally, universities would give lectures in all the theory, then students would be parachuted into a school somewhere and the supervising teacher would say to them, 'Well, all of that theory's very interesting, but I'm now going to teach you how to teach,'" Rickards said. "We're able to teach the theory in the context of practice, but [will] also be able to sequence the practice with the theory."

But training teachers in a clinical framework is expensive. Teach for Australia and the masters program at Melbourne University are being supported by substantial Commonwealth grants, raising the question of whether it is practical or affordable to adopt a clinical approach in all teaching degrees.

While the federal government considers increasing funding for teaching places to equal that for nursing, schools are already adopting "interventionist" approaches to teaching. Mill Park Secondary principal Trish Horner wants to shake up teaching, and the Teach for Australia associates are part of the plan. She has taken on five this year, including Isbister, who are surplus to her normal allocation of teachers. She has also hired four new permanent teachers straight from traditional teaching courses, chosen over experienced teachers "because they're so damn good".

The feisty, straight-talking principal hopes the drive at universities towards clinical approaches, whereby teachers



press clip

use new diagnostic tests to identify their students' individual needs, will rub off.

Of course, new teachers still have a lot to learn from her experienced staff. "Did they teach you about wind at university?" she asks Isbister, slyly, during a coffee break. "Kids are disgusting when it's windy — they didn't teach you that?" She is also candid about the toll the job will take. "Teaching's a very tiring job, and as the year wears on, it does become harder . . . we often start the year fresh and full of ideas, but often things get on top of you."

Isbister, however, has more to recommend him than youthful energy. "He is really intent on making this work . . . but what I like best when I listen to Shaun is just how much he believes in his students."

Horner believes in them too, stopping frequently as she walks through the corridors to gush over student artworks. And she knows they can succeed — an entire cohort of business management students scored above the state average in VCE recently. "That is just fantastic for us. We take anyone who walks in the door and says, can I enrol? So not only do I take all the locals, but I also take all the young people who have been shown the door by independent schools."

She rejects the tag "disadvantaged", preferring "diverse", with students coming from a mix of cultures and family backgrounds. But it is not their background but their futures that concern her. "They don't see beyond school. And that's what's different about our kids. They don't think about university. Their disadvantage is

more from . . . not having those high aims, not having a role model. Shaun is a role model."

The Teach for Australia associates have had their own role models during their six weeks of training. Teach for All volunteers, veterans from Teach for America and Teach First UK, conducted regular evening sessions for them, drawing on their own experience as fledgling teachers in tough classrooms.

After dining together on sloshy college fare in a university cafeteria at 7pm, the associates wander across to a conference room for a session on motivation by Christina Calderon and Elizabeth McKenna, two young, incredibly nice American women.

"Thank you so much for being able to come, we all really appreciate it," says Calderon.

They show a video of a Teach for America cult figure, Justin Meli, half Tom Cruise, half Guy Smiley, whose whole look speaks of determination and can-do chutzpah. Stalking around his year 3 classroom, he is mesmerising, even to a bunch of Australians watching on a screen thousands of kilometres away.

"I'm going to share with you some top secret information here," he says. "This is the classroom of Operation Smart. They send us here from Operation Smart headquarters to classes because they have the potential to be the smartest students in the country."

The kids look on aghast: Meli has drawn the shades as though wary of spies, and speaks lower as he explains his "big secret" — hard work is the only way to "get smart" — before unveiling the

class motto: "Work hard, get smart, wo-oo, wo-oo!"

At first blush, it's classic American schmaltz. It's hard to imagine a Mill Park teacher, for instance, rousing her students into a fist-pumping chorus of "Yes we can!" But McKenna connects it convincingly to her main arguments. Believe in your students, and the power of team spirit and positivity.

It's approaching lunchtime at Mill Park Secondary College, and the students are itching to get out. Isbister walks around the classroom checking the students' work, and crouching down to answer questions about the worksheet.

"Can we just chuck it out, sir?" asks one doleful boy.

Isbister admits he has a long way to go, but believes he made the right decision in becoming a teacher. At the start of the term, he handed out to all his students a worksheet with his classroom expectations, including "set high expectations of yourself and believe you can achieve them" next to a picture of Barack Obama, and "try your best and hardest always".

This is only week one, but there are signs that Isbister's encouragement will pay off. As he walks around returning the homework sheets, the boys at the back are incredulous that one of their mates actually completed the work. "What? You did the work? Brother, did you do the work?"

"Mate, I've gotta learn shit," says his friend. "This here's crunch time."

"Two years is good, because it gives people an opportunity to find out whether or not they actually want a career in this caper. Certainly, I plan to stay on."

SHAUN ISBISTER

Teacher Shaun Isbister with some of his year 11 students at Mill Park Secondary College.

PICTURE: REBECCA HALLAS

Sunday Age
Sunday 7/02/2010

Page: 15
Section: General News
Region: Melbourne, AU
Circulation: 226900
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 1,381.51 sq.cms.



slice
slicemedia.com

press clip

