

## LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK: FRAMING THE FUTURE FOR TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a participatory action research project that examined strategies to support teaching for social justice in the early years. Such a curriculum promotes inclusive and respectful lifelong learning. The success of this study, and others like it, will frame the future of teaching for social justice.

### KEYWORDS

early childhood education - teaching for social justice - children's literature.

### INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper borrows from Australian icon, Slim Dusty's (2000) hauntingly reflective recording: *Looking Forward, Looking Back*; and this theme pervades the paper. It is believed that this is what lifelong learning is all about: living purposefully in the present while looking forward to the future yet not losing sight of the successes and failures of the past. The future is built on what one learns from the past. Popkewitz (2006, p. 130) contends "the lifelong learner lives in the future" as an *unfinished cosmopolitan* (Popkewitz, 2004; 2006) in an information and learning society (Lawn, 2003). This *unfinished cosmopolitan* problem-solves and works collaboratively in communities (Popkewitz & Gustafson, 2002). However, the research project outlined in this paper is underpinned by the concern that young children often begin their lifelong learning journeys with negative perceptions of difference and diversity; and that these perceptions negatively impact on conceptions of social justice.

There is little doubt that throughout the preschool years children are not only becoming more conscious of their world but also developing their moral structures by absorbing the attitudes and values of their family, culture and society (Nixon & Aldwinkle, 1997). The preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings and are critical in forming attitudes towards difference and diversity (Mac Naughton, 2003a). However, prejudices form very early in life and studies have consistently revealed that children have the ability to distinguish among racial differences and to develop negative attitudes and prejudices towards certain groups of people from the age of three (Brown, 1998; Connolly, 2003; Dau, 2001; Harper & Bonnanno, 1993; Siraj-Blatchford, 1995; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003). Moreover,

by the time those children reach preschool age they have already become socially proficient in the ways that they appropriate and manipulate racist discourses (Connolly, 2003; Mundine & Giugni, 2006; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002).

Clearly today's preschoolers are tomorrow's parents, citizens, leaders and decision makers (Connolly, 2003; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003). Consequently, for a future characterised by justice, peace and understanding it is imperative that early childhood educators take responsibility for fostering a curriculum that challenges any form of prejudice and upholds equity, justice and human dignity through a curriculum that promotes teaching for social justice. However, many teachers struggle to find appropriate pedagogical strategies that work to support and promote such a curriculum (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Lingard, Mills & Hayes, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). This paper examines how in the United States and the United Kingdom this problem was successfully addressed through research involving primary and secondary teachers utilising children's literature to enhance teaching for social justice in their classrooms. It then examines my own doctoral study, conducted in Australia, which builds upon these successes by similarly incorporating the use of children's literature in preschool settings. This paper outlines the strategies that were successfully implemented by teachers involved in this collaborative study using children's literature to promote and support teaching for social justice. It is expected that teaching for social justice in the early years will form a foundation that will guide learners towards a lifelong valuing of difference, diversity, human dignity and justice.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last few years there has been a growing research interest in teaching for social justice. Yet, Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000, p.4) pointed out, with some concern, that most of the literature emanating from this research regarding race, gender, class and 'agency' in education had

mainly focused on older children or students in higher education. However, recent studies in the United States and the United Kingdom (Arizipe & Styles, 2003; Burns, 2004; Damico & Riddle, 2004; Galda & Beach, 2001; Leland, Harste & Huber, 2005; Mills, Stephens, O'Keefe & Waugh, 2004; Wolk, 2004) attest to the successful use of children's literature to initiate critical discussion regarding unjust practices and teach for social justice in the primary classroom. Whitmore, Martens, Goodman and Owocki (2005) synthesised critical lessons from research during the past several decades to share a transactional view of early literacy development. They reported that listening and responding to shared book experiences (storytime) allowed group members to push each other to think more critically and glean deeper understandings of the text. Whitmore et al. (2005) contend that critical texts, addressing social justice issues such as culture, race, gender, sexuality, ability and socioeconomic status, led children to search for answers to powerful questions about these issues. They found that by raising and resolving questions through critical social texts, children were presented with intellectual challenges that connected new ideas to their personal understandings of the world.

Leland et al. (2005) found that undertaking a critical approach to storytime heightened First-Graders' awareness of social justice issues and created a harmonious classroom atmosphere. Arizipe et al. (2003) examined British children's responses to the picture book *Lily Takes a Walk* and found that group discussions (usually teacher-led) helped readers work together to arrive at more complex interpretations of the pictorial text. The researchers were struck by the intellectual seriousness, as well as the enjoyment, with which the children viewed the book. These children were engrossed by the task and reacted strongly to the pictorial text, articulating not only likes and dislikes but ethical and moral perceptions.

Many researchers and academics (Kroll, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Machet, 2002; Saxby & Winch, 1991; Sheahan-Bright, 2002; Stephens, 1992) concur that texts represent cultural, social, political and economic ideologies, values and attitudes which represent certain readings of the world, thus socialising their readers. Indeed books can perpetuate prejudices (Siraj-Blatchford, 1995). Therefore it is of importance to guide the young reader in critically examining texts to identify social injustices implied as the norm. However, Wolk (2004) suggests that picture books have undergone a profound transformation over the past few years, with

authors respectfully exploring social justice issues such as race, culture, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic status and social responsibility.

Looking back over the above research initiatives that address teaching for social justice, and the discussion on children's literature has informed my own research perspectives. Early childhood education sets the foundation for lifelong learning and participating productively in a multicultural society (Swinarski & Breitborde, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that research initiatives explore pedagogical strategies that assist early childhood educators to implement a curriculum that teaches for social justice and will guide young children to value difference, diversity and human dignity for the sake of a productive, inclusive and respectful multicultural society. To this end this study examined storytime sessions in two Australian preschool settings over a six month period involving three to five year olds to investigate 'how children's literature may be used to heighten and encourage young children's awareness of, and sensitivities to social justice issues.'

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Critical Theory

I chose critical theory to frame this research project because it required very deep reflection on, and 'peeling' away the many layers of this study: early childhood pedagogy; young children's awareness of, and sensitivities to social justice issues (previously mentioned in this paper); children's literature; and collaborative research. I believed critical theory could underpin this study and open up space for discussion because it "is particularly concerned with issues of power and justice and the ways that... matters of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion and other forces shape both educational institutions and individual consciousness" (Villaverde, Kincheloe & Helyar, 2006, p.319).

According to Peters, Olssen and Lankshear (2003) the term 'critical' (as it occurs in 'critical theory') was employed to refer to social theory that was authentically self-reflexive. It appears then, that critical theory has a twofold undertaking: it strives to be educative by guiding its advocates to explore conditions of possibility; and it strives to be emancipatory by providing potentially transformative outcomes for these advocates. Peters et al. (2003) propose other features of critical theory that also helped frame this study: critical theory has explanatory, normative, and practical dimensions – it must offer empirical accounts of a social condition; critical theory must aim toward change for the

better; and critical theory must provide an improved self-understanding of the social agents who desire transformation. Therefore critical theory assisted this research project firstly, by driving the research team to 'explore conditions of possibility' regarding how storytime could be utilised to teach for social justice; secondly, it had transformative outcomes by way of assisting the early childhood educators and the preschoolers involved in this study to view children's literature critically to examine social justice issues and transform their thinking; and thirdly, through empirical accounts of storytime sessions and self-reflection of the early childhood educators (as co-researchers) each preschool setting 'changed for the better' (discussed later in this paper).

This study believed in the assumptions underlying critical theory that human beings are able to act and think rationally, are capable of being self-reflexive and have the capacity to be self-determining. Not only does this assumption apply to adults but to young children as well. This research project was influenced by the sociology of childhood, the postmodern view of children and childhood, and the children's rights movement. From a sociological viewpoint, childhood is understood as a social construction and children are seen as competent social actors co-creating their reality (Corsaro, 1997; Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000; Qvortrup, 1994). From the postmodern view, children are perceived as knowledgeable, competent and powerful members of society (Bruner, 1996; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) capable of expressing and sharing their ideas, opinions and perspectives (Brooker, 2001; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003). The contemporary rights of the child movement stresses the importance of seriously and conscientiously upholding the child's right to express her/his own beliefs in an atmosphere of respect and acceptance (Freeman, 1998).

While it is believed that both educators of young children and young children themselves are capable, knowledgeable and have the capacity to be self-determining it is not always the case in research projects that their voices and ideas are heard or respected (Cooper & White, 2006; Kincheloe, 2003; Walsh, Tobin & Graue, 1991). In this study I wished to value their expert knowledge and ensure that their voices, opinions and ideas were heard, respected, trusted and acted upon. What underlines critical theory is the urge to give voice to those who are silenced (Freire, 1996).

## A Participatory Worldview

Reason and Bradbury (2006) contend that a challenge to change our worldview is central to our times. Contemporary researchers need to address epistemological errors as well, built into our thinking by modernity, which have huge consequences for justice and ecological sustainability (Bateson 1972).

The positivist worldview, that has been considered the gold standard of research, sees science as disconnected from everyday life and the researcher as subject (who remains objective) in a world of separate objects. Mind and reality are divided. Knowledge is not connected to power. With Reason and Bradbury (2006, p.5) I argue that this "positivist worldview has outlived its usefulness". The new, emergent worldview is described as

*systemic, holistic, relational, feminine, experiential, but its defining characteristic is that it is participatory: our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. We participate in our world, so that the 'reality' that we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and construing. The participative metaphor is particularly apt for action research, because as we participate in creating our world we are already embodied and breathing beings who are necessarily acting – and this draws us to consider how to judge the quality of our acting. (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7).*

A participatory worldview sees human beings (along with their ecology) as co-creating their world. To do this we must be situated and reflexive. We must be "explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know, serving the democratic, practical ethos of action research" (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of action research was chosen for this study on three considerations. Firstly, action research reflects a participatory worldview by which this study was framed. Secondly, action research is a collaborative inquiry method that values participant knowledge, skills and expertise and seeks to empower and give voice to those involved in the study and who will use the findings. Lastly, as Jones (2006) contends, action research engages an ethical commitment to improving society and making it more just; to improving ourselves so that we may become more conscious of our responsibility as members

of a democratic society; and ultimately to improving our lives together as we build community. The last two considerations are underpinned by critical theory.

### Research Design

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a relatively new and collaborative approach to action research (Torres, 2004). PAR signifies a position within qualitative research methods, an epistemology that aligns well with a participatory worldview and believes knowledge is embedded in social relationships and most influential when produced collaboratively through action (Fine et al., 2004). To this end the research team undertook the following cyclical, spiralling action research process: observation, reflection, collaboration/theory building, planning (based on observations), and implementation of planned action; re-observation, re-reflection, re-collaboration, re-planning, re-implementation and the cycle continued (Bell, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2001; Torres, 2004).

The application of PAR was appropriate for this study because it was a means that produced knowledge and improved practice through its collaborative nature: the direct involvement of participants in setting the schedule, data collection and analysis, and use of findings (Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2001). Two preschools were involved in the study: Preschool A and Preschool B. The participants, considered co-researchers, from Preschool A were the preschool director, the preschool teacher and the preschool assistant. The co-researchers from Preschool B were the teacher/director and the assistant. We met weekly as a research team to examine videotaped footage of storytime sessions from both preschools to analyse if, how and why children's literature could assist as a strategy to implement a curriculum that would support and promote teaching for social justice. Fieldnotes and journal entries supported this analysis. Through observation on, and reflection and analysis of, what the teachers and children were saying and doing during storytime sessions, regarding such issues as race, gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, ability and socioeconomic status, picture books for the following week were chosen and a plan of action outlined.

PAR is influential to the social justice movement (Torres, 2004) and therefore quite fitting to this study, because its participative nature and transformative action allowed teachers and children to critically scrutinise their understandings of, and appreciation for, justice,

difference, diversity and human dignity. By actively and collectively shaping and reshaping these understandings through storytime sessions children became more sensitive to and aware of social justice issues, and teachers developed strategies for teaching for social justice.

### RESULTS

Initially, the study began comparing children's responses to critical texts with their reactions to non-critical texts (picture books that attended to mundane issues). It was found that critical texts did encourage deeper, more reflective discussion within the preschool groups. However, the research team quickly realised that indeed all texts (including what were considered non-critical) had the potential for critical examination, thus becoming 'critical texts'. Often the children's responses to what the team considered a non-critical text produced such reflective discussion that both the children and teachers were driven to explore underlying social justice issues. As the action research progressed discussions following storytime became longer, more reflective, more articulate and more in depth (on the part of both teachers and children). Teachers utilised higher order and open-ended questions that encouraged insightful responses by the children. However, most importantly, the teachers found that carefully and purposefully **listening** to children's responses during storytime and clarifying, without judgment, what was being said drove the post storytime discussion. Children 'bounced off one another' during discussions to examine their world and the social justice issues that the stories highlighted. Reflective planning of storytime produced a superior learning experience for both teachers and children.

Strategies that were successfully tried and implemented during the action research included elevating storytime status from a transition activity to an important session of the day, allowing ample time for discussion and response (for example beginning the preschool day); reading and discussing critical texts that celebrated difference and diversity of race, ability, culture, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and socioeconomic status; reading and discussing texts that challenged the *status quo*; utilising open-ended and higher order questioning techniques; listening to children's responses and reflectively choosing (and allowing children to choose) texts that would consolidate the social justice issues that had been highlighted in previously read texts; revisiting whole texts or parts of texts for clarification; placing the social justice issues covered in the texts into the preschool context; responding to social justice

issues through action (for example encouraging the sharing of what the children have – clothes, toys – with those who go without; supporting inclusion in play situations at preschool); inviting people of diverse cultures to the preschool; encouraging artistic response to the texts read (for example re-enactment, drawing, construction, dramatic play, singing and dancing); reinforcing and consolidating social justice issues read in texts by displaying related posters and making available relevant jigsaws, dolls and games; involving and informing parents.

## DISCUSSION

These findings are very encouraging as to the use of children's literature when implementing a curriculum that fosters teaching for social justice in early childhood settings. The children's responses towards the conclusion of the action research displayed a heightened awareness of and sensitivities to social justice issues. The preschoolers now recognised characters acting unjustly, something not noticed by the children at the beginning of the study.

The research team believes that the intervening pedagogical strategy of examining social justice issues through children's literature and employing the strategies mentioned above have been successful. The study has impacted positively on the development of preschoolers' understanding of and sensitivities to social justice issues and has assisted the educators with strategies for teaching for social justice. At the end of the school year, and one term after the action research had completed, teachers documented that the preschool groups involved in the study were more cohesive, harmonious and inclusive than they were before the study began.

This study will provide some answers for early childhood educators who are struggling to find strategies to support teaching for social justice. Such a curriculum should be of paramount importance in education. In direct opposition to an emphasis on academic standards, a national curriculum, and national assessment, Noddings (1995, p. 365) argues that "our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable people ..... All children must learn to care for other human beings." Many years ago Maxine Greene (1995) wrote the following which is still pertinent today:

*We can bring warmth into places where young persons come together ... we can bring in the dialogues and laughter that threaten monologues and rigidity. And surely we can affirm and reaffirm the*

*principles that centre around belief in justice and freedom and respect for human rights... (Greene 1995, p. 43).*

## CONCLUSION

Looking back over this paper one can comprehend the imperative to begin teaching for social justice in the early years. However, it was highlighted that early childhood educators struggled to find suitable pedagogical strategies to assist them in promoting such a curriculum. The paper then explained that this study was framed by reflecting on the successes of contemporary research conducted overseas. It discussed that the study was underpinned by critical theory and a participatory worldview that supported the choice of the research design: PAR. The paper finally outlined strategies that have been 'put to the test' by early childhood educators who have found success in using children's literature to support and promote teaching for social justice.

The current study contributes to framing the future for teaching for social justice in the early years with the view to raising preschool children's positive recognition of difference and sensitivity to social justice issues. This in turn may lay solid foundations for lifelong learning based on respect and mutual accord, where all individuals may contribute to social, economic, cultural and political life 'irrespective of race, religion, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin' (Calma 2007, p.2).

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