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## Reconciling Dilemmas of Social Justice in Literacy Lessons: A Case Study of Preservice Primary Teachers

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*Abstract: Literacy is promoted as one factor in overcoming disadvantage. In this paper, we employ Fraser's (1997 & 2008) framing of social justice in order to analyse the disparate agendas of literacy education for improved outcomes in national policy. We do this to better understand the dilemmas confronting preservice teachers as they prepare to become teachers in complex education contexts. We then examine what 20 preservice primary teachers say about social justice in interview responses to a scripted scenario. Our findings demonstrate that most preservice teachers are trying to demonstrate that they have a well-placed commitment to teaching for social justice, however, most of our respondents are yet to frame productive practices that might work in providing socially just education for the students they will teach. These outcomes raise possibilities for future iterations of preservice teacher courses at the case study site and beyond.*

### Background: Literacy Teaching in Diverse Contexts

There is widespread international agreement that literacy, *inter alia*, is one important factor in overcoming the educational disadvantage jigsaw (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2010). A plethora of research, including the comprehensive *Teachers Matter* research undertaken by the OECD (2005), has established that the quality of teaching has a significant influence on students' literacy outcomes (Ladwig, 2005). The purpose of this paper is not to enter into the debates of 'teacher quality' that have played out over the past three to five years in countries like Australia. We have argued in other forums (see for example, Luke and Woods, 2009) that drawing links between teacher quality and student outcomes to explain the overall patterns of student disadvantage in systems that remain high quality but low equity (Luke, Woods & Weir 2013) are overly simplistic. Literacy teaching and learning *per se* cannot "correct the uneven distribution of life chances that generates education inequality" (Morrow, 2000, p. 144). However, we continue to argue that there is much that quality literacy teaching can achieve in the name of social justice (See Woods, Dooley, Luke, & Exley, 2014). Thus, a key priority for our work as teacher educators continues to be producing teacher graduates with high levels of knowledge and understanding about the teaching and learning of literacy for diverse student cohorts.

Such understandings are highly topical, given that the make-up of the Australian population is changing in unprecedented ways. This is evidenced by census data that tells us that in 2012 60% of the total population growth was as a result of migration, with this figure up by 17% from the 2011 growth figures. Whilst settler arrivals from within schemes related to attracting skilled workers and supporting family reunions tend to parallel more traditional patterns of migration from Europe, South Africa and Asia, until recently the Australian humanitarian visa categories were dominated by arrivals from Burma, Iraq, Sudan, Thailand,

Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Burundi. The recent shifting feast of refugee policy guidelines from the newly elected Abbott Government is likely to change these demographic trends again. However, regardless, in and of themselves these migration figures oversimplify deeper and more important concepts of diversity for a country like Australia with its relatively small population. It is important to resist what remain as 'common sense' assumptions of demographic homogeneity – that is of our place within the Western 'white' English-speaking world - with evidence that our population is heterogeneous across economic, language, family, social and cultural dimensions. The country's demography is in a state of change across a variety of dimensions. For example, the Indigenous population is increasing, and now there is a much larger proportion of those identifying as Indigenous who are children or youth than was the case in past decades. Understandings of the languages and cultures of these students are often made invisible in schools (Exley, 2010) especially when they are schooled in urban locations. Additionally whilst the United-Kingdom and New Zealand remain stable as the main countries of birth for overseas-born people entering Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), complex processes of globalisation have increased the diversity of populations entering Australia via these routes as well. So by that we mean that many people arriving from countries such as New Zealand, have indeed originated, or their families have originated, from a variety of other countries.

In contrast to this picture of Australia as a socially, culturally and linguistically diverse nation is the realisation that the backgrounds of most teachers working in schools are not representative of the multi-ethnic/multi-cultural Australian population. In their submission to the *Top of the Class: Report on the Inquiry into Teacher Education*, Skilbeck and Connell pithily describe teaching in Australia as:

*largely a lower middle class, Anglo-Celtic profession, feminine in the primary and lower secondary years and some subject areas (humanities and languages) and masculine in upper secondary years, some subject areas (science, mathematics) and senior leadership positions in schools.*

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. 37)

Their concern is that "teaching is in danger of being stereotyped through these features of the teaching force" (p. 37). A few independent submissions to this same inquiry urged the committee to produce recommendations to engage in a process of positive discrimination to increase the diversity of the current preservice teacher population 'to better reflect the contemporary diversity of Australian society' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. 37). According to the New South Wales Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues (cited in Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. 48), 23% of students in our schools are from linguistic backgrounds other than English compared with only 13% of teachers.

In an attempt to focus on issues around catering for diversity, this paper investigates how a cohort of largely mono-cultural preservice teachers undertaking a four year undergraduate Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree at a large Australian university conceptualise what it means to work productively with a diverse range of students. Calling on understandings of social justice (Fraser, 1997 & 2008), we discuss the preservice teachers' responses to a scenario presented to them as part of a research interview. The scenario questioned pedagogical practices related to the use of English as the sole acceptable language to be used within a classroom. To begin the paper, we detail the dominant discourses of literacy teaching and learning that circulated at the time of the research, particularly as they pertain to notions of diversity. We then move to an analysis of the preservice teachers' responses to the scenario and finally, we conclude the paper by considering implications for preservice teaching at the case study site and perhaps more generally.

### **Circulating Discourses of Diversity for Literacy Teachers**

The preservice teacher participants who form the cohort of participants in this study all commenced an undergraduate degree in February, 2007, in a Faculty of Education at a large Australian university. Throughout the course of the participants' studies (2007-2010 inclusive), several waves of state and federal reform impacted upon literacy teaching and learning in schools. These reforms had particular consequences for possible understandings of diverse social, cultural and linguistic contexts. The push toward accountability as testing and the promotion of parental choice as justification for the publication of school results on national tests of literacy and numeracy have been set as legitimate responses to a call to improving outcomes for all students. As such, over the past decade Australia has seen the introduction of national literacy and numeracy testing of students in years 3, 5, 7, and 9 (National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy or hereafter NAPLAN) and the publication of individual school results on the *My School* website ([www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au)). A follow up reform, called *National Partnership Agreement for Schools* (see <http://smarterschools.gov.au/> for more information), provided funding for some schools assessed as providing schooling for: low SES communities, Indigenous communities, or students who were not performing to agreed levels in literacy and numeracy. The funding was provided to support schools in engaging with innovative and tailored learning opportunities. NAPLAN scores were still one part of the formula for measuring the 'success' or otherwise of the new forms of innovation.

In the following section, we introduce the context of Australian school education by elaborating upon these reforms. While a recent change to the Australian Federal Government might result in new policy under new names, there is little indication that the push toward autonomy of schools, accountability as testing or consistency will dramatically change under the Abbot Liberal Government and so our discussion here remains relevant. Our point in discussing these policies though is to demonstrate the complex and often disparate policy agenda that teachers are expected to engage within. We then apply an analytical framework drawn from the work of Fraser (1997 & 2008) in social justice, to better understand the complex dilemmas besetting new teachers. We are particularly interested in how the preservice teachers understand these dilemmas as they move toward becoming teachers in classrooms.

### **The Context of Literacy Teaching and Learning in Schools**

An important factor in the Federal government's push to improve outcomes of Australian school children centres on an overt centralised assessment of students in years 3 (students aged 8), 5 (students aged 10), 7 (students aged 12) and 9 (students aged 14). The *National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy*, was first implemented in 2008 by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and has continued annually since that time. Prior to 2008 all States and Territories had state-based testing schemes and provided data to a federal department for national reporting purposes. According to the official website, [www.nap.edu.au](http://www.nap.edu.au), NAPLAN is a program of national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy (National Assessment Program, 2011). The NAPLAN results of individual schools were published on the My School website ([www.myschools.edu.au](http://www.myschools.edu.au)) for the first time in 2009. This publication of results was not in the form of league tables of raw scores of individuals, but instead as results of year levels in a school in either numbered scores, bands or via a representation of 'gain' in scores from one NAPLAN year level to the next (My School, 2011). There are also league tables that compare what are known as 'similar' schools, these being schools grouped according to a complicated formula of 'likeness', which includes a categorisation of the Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA). These tables

represent the comparison of the raw scores of the statistically similar schools (the process for determining statistically similar schools, and of calculating the ICSEA rating of individual schools, has changed over the years that My School has been available to the public). The ICSEA score purportedly calculates a school's ICSEA rating by factoring variables including 'socio-economic characteristics of the areas where the students who attend the school live, whether a school is in a metropolitan, regional or remote area, the proportion of students from a language background other than English, as well as the proportion of Indigenous students enrolled at the school' (My School, 2011). Schools can also be compared to other schools in their local area as part of the My School suite of possibilities. In both of these comparisons, schools are listed as being 'substantially below', 'below', 'close', 'above' or 'substantially above' the performance of the other named school(s). All participating year 3, 5, 7, and 9 students were expected to undertake the series of tests over a two day period in May of 2008 and then again in subsequent years.

The preservice teachers who are the research participants of this study undertook their practicum placements in the lead up to and during the May 2008 and 2009 NAPLAN tasks. Even if the preservice teachers were not in a year 3, 5, 7, or 9 class, the activity in schools around this testing regime was such that the preservice teachers would have been aware of the NAPLAN agenda through whole-of-school staff meetings and the relentless media coverage of the controversy surrounding NAPLAN, its implementation and reporting (see Exley, 2010). Some progressive educators believed that instead of fulfilling the task of 'assessment for learning', NAPLAN was a misguided 'race', where states and territories and schooling systems were pitted against each other in the media and by the Government itself on the My School website (Exley, 2010). The way in which the results are reported publicly on My School means that for one school to do well, others must not (Woods, 2012). And the media reported the results in similar ways. As an example, in 2008, the state of Queensland was discursively constructed as coming 'second last', a result described in the state's daily newspaper as 'disastrous' and the sign of an 'education system in crisis' (Chilcott, 2009a). The Queensland Minister for Education at the time, Geoff Wilson, reportedly singled out one at-risk group, Indigenous students, for 'weighing down' the 2008 performance data (O'Loan, 2008). In response to the ensuing public outrage, early in 2009, the Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh, implemented a four pronged approach: [i] commissioning Professor Geoff Masters (Masters, 2009) to advise on reform strategies for improving Queensland's NAPLAN performance; [ii] mandating that students in the NAPLAN years practise NAPLAN 2008 in preparation for NAPLAN 2009; [iii] writing to carers of students in the NAPLAN years to encourage them to work through the online version of NAPLAN 2008 with their child (Bligh, 2009); and [iv] sending a 'flying squad' of educational auditors to the worst performing NAPLAN schools to review literacy and numeracy teaching and learning practices (Fraser, 2009). In the following weeks, the media reported that Queensland teachers had abandoned 'rich curricula and innovative, deep learning experiences' in favour of 'teaching to the test' (Bell, 2009). Queensland Association of State School Principals (QASP) president, Norm Hart, confirmed that 'NAPLAN was now a prime driver of teachers' work, with Education Queensland sending out almost daily missives' (Chilcott, 2009b). English Teachers Association of Queensland (ETAQ) president, Garry Collins, reported teachers 'were saying that in response to NAPLAN they were now, one day a week, getting kids to do test-like exercises....' (Chilcott, 2009c).

After the 2009 NAPLAN results were made public, the state's daily newspaper once again focused on interstate comparisons and podium placings. For example, Chalmers' (2009) article drew sweeping generalisations about constructed categories of students, turning the lens onto gendered divisions, social-class divides and the urban/rural contrast whilst also employing the metaphor of a family feud to note that 'regional and remote students also struggled to beat their city cousins' (p. 4). In her defence of the Federal Government's My School website, Prime Minister Gillard pointed the finger of blame at teachers: 'If you

compare schools that are teaching similar kids around the country and you see that kids from one school are doing twice as good as the others, it's not the kid's fault - it's what's going on in the school' (Rolfe, 2010, n.p.). The new Federal Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne has reported in the media on numerous occasions that he is very enthusiastic about testing school children, so it would seem that a recent change of government (September, 2013) will not bring about changes to this policy initiative.

Within the same time period, a second federal reform to make an impact on literacy teaching and learning in some of the nation's schools was the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) *National Partnership Agreement on Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities*. This agreement rolled out \$11 million of Commonwealth funding in 2008-09, \$153 million in 2009-10 and \$206 million in 2010-11, approximately \$376 million in 2011-12 and \$362 million for 2012-13. Funds are specifically targeted to low socio-economic status school communities to achieve the overall aim of 'boosting Australia's participation and productivity', in particular, 'young people meeting basic literacy and numeracy standards, and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievement improving' whilst also promoting 'social inclusion' and reducing 'the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children' (COAG, 2008, p. 4). Whilst the Agreement overtly funds 'innovative and tailored learning opportunities' (COAG, 2008, p. 5), it also lists 'literacy and numeracy achievement of year 3, 5, 7, and 9 students in national testing', *inter alia*, as evidence of achieving the performance indicators (COAG, 2008 p. 7). Indigenous students, students with a disability, students with other additional learning needs, students from a non-English speaking background, refugees and homeless students are all singled out as needing to be tracked against the NAPLAN standard (COAG, 2008, p. 7), and yet it is students from these categories who are over represented in the group of students who do not sit NAPLAN each year.

### **A Theoretical Analysis of The Reforms to Literacy Teaching and Learning**

This overview of two significant and recent Australian educational reforms renders visible the narrowness of approaches directed toward dealing with diversity in the fray of literacy teaching and learning. While the policies may change with successive governments the complexity remains. We develop our understandings of these two reforms further by drawing on Nancy Fraser's (1997) work. Fraser has put forward first a two, and more recently a three, dimensional model of social justice. In her early work, Fraser (1997) suggested that social justice related to redistributive and recognitive justice. The paradigm of redistributive justice is about ensuring the resources of a society are distributed based on principles of equity, and this may require a shifting of resources to ensure opportunities for those most likely to be disadvantaged (Fraser, 2003, p. 7). Principles of redistributive justice work in, and through, literacy education to prioritise access to those skills, resources and practices that are valued by society in their definitions of literacy success and improvement. In contrast, Fraser and Honneth (2003, p. 1) described 'recognition' as cultural or symbolic change. As such recognitive justice includes measures that not only recognise but also celebrate and value cultural diversity and provide genuine space for representations of this diversity within the core educational priorities and curriculum of the system. In what Fraser (2003) has described as a "difference friendly world" (p. 7), success in education would not be not dependent upon belonging to the dominant culture, and those from traditionally marginalised communities would see themselves and their social and cultural values and practices within the mainstream ways of doing schooling. Recognitive justice assumes that everyone should have the opportunity to engage in positive and effective schooling (Woods, 2012) regardless of their cultural beliefs and values, languages or resources. In her more recent work Fraser (2008; and in Dahl, Stoltz & Willig, 2004) has put forward a third

dimension of social justice, that being representation. According to Fraser, representative social justice relates to the right of all members of a community to be genuinely involved in decision-making related to the structures, content and practices of institutions. Related to primary schooling, representative justice is about parent and community inclusion in decisions of curriculum, pathways and structures that goes beyond tokenistic consultation.

While it has been popular to consider redistributive, recognitive and representative justice as separate ways of engaging with social justice (Fraser, 1997 & 2008), theoretically speaking it is not possible for one dimension of justice to work without the other two elements also being in place. So it is necessary to understand social justice and injustice as multi dimensional, a construct that takes account of redistributive and recognitive justice as well as providing space for representation of a variety of voices. Through an approach Fraser (2003) terms as perspectival dualism, ‘one can use the redistribution perspective to bring into focus the economic dimensions of what are usually viewed as issues of recognition’ (p. 63). As Fraser (1997) theorises recognition and redistribution are ‘far from occupying two (sic) airtight separate spheres, economic injustice and cultural injustice are usually interimbricated so as to reinforce each other dialectically’ (p. 15). We would suggest that it is only possible to bring these two approaches together when representative justice is also in place.

Current approaches to providing equitable education to children in low SES and culturally diverse communities - such as those reforms detailed in the section above – are grounded in an understanding of justice as distribution (Fraser, 2003). While such policies are very necessary, focusing on this element of social justice alone has the effect of hiding the complexity of unjust institutional arrangements (Luke et al, 2013). What is really required if a just education system is to be achieved, is an understanding of social justice that reconciles redistributive with recognitive and representative justice. Policies that focus on any one way of understanding justice and injustice will never be enough, and yet teachers are currently working in a context where policy after policy layer on top of each other to redistribute funds and resources, but without either recognising the important cultural and social values of students, nor the rights of their communities to have a say in the content and processes of education. This call for representative justice is not to be confused with current Australian Federal policy encouraging *independent public schools*. Initiatives like this provide more autonomy for principals and not for communities, and recent research (see Luke et al, 2013) has demonstrated that such moves are likely to create wider gaps not ‘close’ gaps in our education system.

Thus, to theorise the empirical reality in the Australian context of teaching and learning, the active pursuit of a minimum standard of ‘literacy for all’, as evidenced in NAPLAN’s underpinning principles and the funds made available through the National Partnership Agreement, aligns with notions of redistributive justice. Although Fraser and Honneth (2003) describe redistributive justice as a ‘term central to both the moral philosophies and social struggles of the Fordist era’ (p. 1), these reforms demonstrate that the enactment of redistributive justice in an isolated sense, and without due concern of recognition and representations, has not evaporated in the new millennium. The media bites, for example, provided by Chalmers (2009), and the ensuing National Partnership Agreement, demonstrate that the known subjects of redistributive justice are class-like collectives who are defined economically by a distinctive relation to other class-like collectives. The discourses that recognise the need for tailored learning opportunities for these particular groups of students, call for the foregrounding of cultural categories that work to construct whole communities in deficit. As Luke, Woods and Weir (2013) remind us, “to date, issues of recognitive justice arise in cultural debates over curriculum content, but have rarely been dealt with in ways that provide embedding in mainstream curriculum in ways that are not token” (p. 23).

The foregrounding of redistributive justice in policy talks to economic disadvantage, but it also refers to the privileging of mainstream knowledge that operates through the

regulative norms of society, as it is linked in token ways to recognition (through the labelling of certain groups as ‘problems’) and representation (through calls for community ‘consultation’). The public learn about the categories of students who ‘weigh down’ Queensland NAPLAN results and must be tracked in national agreements. Although the National Partnership Agreement allowed for the provision of innovative and tailored learning opportunities, it continued to take a narrow perspective on success which reduced the possibilities for the recognition of difference as anything other than deficit. Failure to adopt recognitive principles of social justice, that is, to recognise and value other ways of knowing and being, including culture and language preferences, at the same time as limiting understandings of representative justice, will cement social injustices for diverse groups of students.

The reality of the situation, for us as teacher educators, is that preservice teachers are on the verge of having to respond to these reforms or others like them when they graduate and become beginning teachers. Of interest to us, is to consider how they understand these policy moves that are overtly redistributive and somewhat tokenistic in their approach to recognition or representation. To unpack this further, in the sections below we ask how preservice primary school teachers reconcile multiple paradigms of justice/injustice when faced with a complex scenario of teaching and learning?

## **The Preservice Teacher Participants and Their Understandings of Socially - Just Schooling**

### **The Participants**

As stated, the preservice teacher participants in this research project commenced their degree in a large Faculty of Education at a large Australian university in February of 2007. In Australia, a common path for teacher education is a four-year undergraduate degree program that combines both university studies and field studies within schools and other education settings. The participants in this study were enrolled in such a degree. As part of a larger longitudinal study the preservice teachers were invited to become participants in a multiple cohort longitudinal study of preservice teachers’ beliefs about knowing and knowledge – that is a study of their epistemological beliefs. The study followed the development of these belief systems as the students progressed through their university studies (see Brownlee, Walker, Lennox, Exley, & Pearce, 2009; Exley, Walker, & Brownlee, 2008; Walker et al, 2009). This paper draws on one part of the data collected as part of this larger study, where 20 preservice teachers, in the third year of their studies, were interviewed after volunteering to be involved in this follow up data collection. As part of these interviews, participants were asked to respond to a scripted scenario which involved an experienced teacher and a preservice teacher in a pedagogical sequence related to the teaching of literacy in the primary years of schooling. It is this section of the interview that is the focus of the analysis in this paper.

The participant cohort comprised 12 females and 8 males. Fifteen participants were between 19 and 29 years of age, with the other five participants being over 25 years of age. The participants reported a variety of pathways into the teacher education degree program. Prior to commencing their Bachelor of Education (Primary), four participants had been engaged in either fulltime or part-time employment, three had come directly from secondary schooling, three had transferred from another university course, and one had spent the time immediately prior to entering the degree program acting as a fulltime parent to her own children. The final nine participants did not provide information on their past employment or education activities.

### **Gathering Data**



We collected the participants' responses to the teaching scenario as part of interviews conducted with a sample of 20 preservice teacher participants. The interview involved the interviewer reading the scripted scenario to the interviewee, and then asking a series of open-ended questions. The questions included the following:

*Do you think that this was the right action by the teacher in this situation?*

*What would you do?*

*Could the teacher be wrong? Could the research be wrong?*

*Do you trust the opinions of experts?*

The teaching and learning scenario details an event where recognitive and redistributive justices and injustices co-existed within the fray of practice in a diverse context of teaching and learning. The scenario is included in its entirety below to facilitate understanding of the analysis.

### *The Scenario – Accounting for Diversity in Literacy Teaching and Learning*

1. In a multi-age primary class, the students were working in groups of five, brainstorming suggestions for their upcoming presentation on water conservation in the home. The class teacher, Ms Edwards, allocated students to mixed-ability groups. She wanted all groups to be 'equal'. Each group had a range of achievement levels, and because the school was located within a refugee resettlement area, each group included two refugee students who had been in Australia for between two and four years and spoke varying degrees of conversational and academic English.

2. During the group work session, Ms Edwards circulated between the groups, asking them about their initial plans and ensuring all group members were contributing. As she approached the group who was working in the withdrawal room with the student teacher, Jane, she noted three students leaning over the chart paper, mapping out possibilities and engaged in animated discussion, and the two refugee students sitting to one side talking in their mother tongue without as much as a pencil and paper to write with. She furrowed her brow and glared at them to show her disapproval of their work practices. Without asking them to explain themselves, she scolded the group for not working together. Then, without saying anything else, she pulled the two refugee students by their upper arm and relocated them to the group. She said, 'Stay with the group'. The student teacher, Jane, spoke up and said, 'Excuse me, Ms Edwards, but we had broken into smaller groups'. Three students were designing the backdrop posters and the other two were planning out a comedy skit. Ms Edwards reiterated her preference for all group members to work together.

*Facilitator Question: Do you think that this was the right action by the teacher in this situation? What would you do?*

3. Ms Edwards left the working space and continued to move onto other groups. The students and Jane agreed that they would cease working in sub-groups and instead would all work on the skit. One student took the role of scribe and the other four offered suggestions. After fifteen minutes, Ms Edwards returned to the group. She noted the five students appeared to be working together, but upon approaching, realised three students were talking in English and the two refugee students were talking in their mother-tongue. This time she scolded the two refugee students, 'Are you actually working?' They both stated they were trying to remember a water saving strategy they had seen at their Aunt's home over the holidays. 'We can contribute better if we discuss things in our mother-tongue first, then translate into English for group discussion'. Ms Edwards redressed them, 'I've told you to only use English

when you're working in groups. Use only English in group work. Do you understand?'

4. Ms Edwards then pulled Jane aside and said, 'All the experts say that you learn English better if you use it as much as you can. The other students need to know what you're thinking'. The student teacher was too nervous to raise her objections with Ms Edwards. She was unsure about the right way to manage the students in a situation but she remembered reading things like what Ms Edwards was saying in textbooks. She thought to herself, experts must be right, mustn't they? It doesn't feel right though.

*Facilitator Questions: Could the teacher be wrong? Could the research be wrong? Do you trust the opinions of experts?*

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The initial analysis of these and other interviews was undertaken by the team, with multiple team members coding the same interviews and then reporting these coding decisions in whole team meetings. Where discrepancies in coding categories eventuated they were discussed until agreements were reached about final coding. After this process, two of the authors recoded this set of interviews by using the team coding as a starting point, but extending the coding to take account of issues related to social justice specifically. This coding followed a thematic approach as a way to uncover the complex, and yet at the same time partial ways in which the preservice teachers drew on discourses of social justice and equity as they claimed and justified their position on issues related to the scenario.

## **Findings – Reconciling Disparate Agendas for Literacy Instruction in Diverse Contexts**

Aside from the preservice teachers' disquiet about the teacher mentor's treatment of Jane, the main themes of response were [i] Violence and its effects on the victims, [ii] Critique of Ms Edwards' pedagogical action vis-a-vis a positive recognition of difference, and [iii] Role of mother tongue in building literacy learning outcomes. In what follows we unpack each of these themes by referring to the responses of the preservice teachers' as they juggled their understandings of social justice within the interview interaction.

### *[i] Violence and Its Effects on the Victims*

Seven participants deplored the physical and verbal violence of the classroom teacher, Ms Edwards. They were emphatic about the inappropriateness of violence in the classroom, describing her behaviour as *a big no-no* and labelling it as a *red flag* incident. One of the preservice teachers, Carl (all names used in this paper are pseudonyms), showed his deeper understanding of the effects of Ms Edward's actions on the students.

Carl: *Just the action of grabbing those kids' arms and putting them back in the group, that would be really traumatic for them, because they're going to think they've done something terribly wrong.... They're just going along with instruction and also the other kids are going to see that and they didn't get called to task there at all but the two refugee children, who are probably having difficulties integrating into a new community are getting almost made a bit of an example of which I don't think is a very good thing because they weren't doing anything wrong at all.*

Significant within Carl's interview talk is his understanding that the teacher's overzealous response to principles of redistributive justice (see paragraph 3 in the scenario above) has resulted in a newly created social position for the refugee students. So despite the fact that the teacher was attempting to ensure the refugee students had access to the dominant language (redistributive justice) Carl is aware that her actions had affected the possibility of the refugee students integrating into the social context of the classroom. Outcomes such as these, where groups of people are 'expelled' from useful participation in society are described by Young (1990, p. 53) as marginalisation. Marginalisation can often be the unintended effect of

redistributive social justice policies that, for example, only focus on redressing material deprivation whilst ignoring its effects, in this case, deprivation of rights and opportunities for marginalised students to exercise their capabilities.

*[ii] Critique of Ms Edwards' Pedagogical Actions Vis-a-vis a Positive Recognition of Difference*

When the preservice teachers were asked what they thought of Ms Edwards' actions, one preservice teacher, Andrew, said whilst he *can understand where Ms Edwards has come from, [he] wouldn't do that*. The other 19 preservice teacher participants disapproved of Ms Edwards' actions and offered comments to suggest that they believed it was a teacher's responsibility to understand the context, and the students, and to provide pedagogical practices to build literacy learning outcomes. Jordan offered the harshest critique of Ms Edwards' actions:

*She really doesn't seem to be supporting the [refugee] students at all. It's like she has some kind of vendetta against them or something.*

More typical of the responses was Eden's, who described Ms Edwards' actions as demonstrating a *fairly limited view*. In summary, the preservice teachers were articulating their concerns that Ms Edwards did not seem to think that recognition of difference is important, that she had dismissed the importance of individual, cultural and social differences.

In their responses to the question about what they would do in this context, the preservice teachers each argued for practices that recognise rather than suppress difference in an attempt to achieve the desired teaching and learning outcome. Kaitlin's response was typical of that offered by many of the participants. Kaitlin noted that she would:

*ask what [the students] were doing, and if I felt that didn't fit in with my lesson at all, suggest a different way to get them back on track.*

Amita offered another strategy that focused on ensuring the teacher's learning outcomes remained intact, but that the ways of working were flexible and negotiated:

*Well, you can work in two subgroups as long as then you meet at the end, discuss what you're going to do, agree on it and then maybe come up with a part of it where they could all work together. So, like, negotiate and come up with a compromise with it.*

This theme of asking the students to explain themselves shows the preservice teacher's developing sense of recognitive justice, that is, of using the students' experiences as their resource for making more objective and less subjective judgements. Such an approach would begin to provide spaces for not just recognition of, but also embedding of, the different experiences of social and cultural knowing that students bring to the classroom. As expressed by Amita here, this is somewhat related to the notion of communicative democracy. As Young (2010) theorises, a 'democratic public arrives at objective political judgement from discussion not by bracketing these differences, but by communicating the experiences and perspectives conditioned by them to one another' (p. 83). In this and other extracts, the preservice teachers' suggestions to explicitly include the marginalised students in democratic discussion and decision-making demonstrate their commitment to principles of recognitive justice.

A detailed response by Paige noted the impetus of her university studies in formulating her underlying principles for literacy teaching in diverse contexts. Paige justifies the students' sub-grouping practices as the basis of real life practices. Paige accounted for a form of recognition, that is learning style differences on the basis of culture, and whilst atypical of the responses generally, this participant was able to construct difference as a resource. Paige was also sensitive to the students' self-esteem.

Paige: *Through the three years [at university], the big emphasis on what they've been teaching us for teaching is that we're aiming for lifelong learning in our students, relating it to outside of the classrooms when they do leave school, they can contribute to society actively. So in a real world context you wouldn't really have*

*five people sitting, working on one thing going through a list. They would break up, work on individual tasks and then come back together. 'This is what I have, what have you got? Okay, let's put these together, let's try this now.' So I think Ms Edwards wasn't really going with the whole goal of lifelong learning. And not really taking into account the differences and individual needs of her students. First saying that the refugee students didn't have a pen or paper to write with, now we don't know where they're from, but in a lot of cultures students aren't taught to learn by writing things down. It's a very verbal [process] – things get passed down. So they probably have the ability to recall things, they prefer to talk about it. So she probably should have checked what they were doing before they got forced to work together. Also, different people have different strengths and they should be encouraged to contribute to a larger project by utilising those skills. Because you want every child to feel like they can contribute and contribute well to something.*

Paige's construction of difference is not inconsequential. She demonstrates that she understands that the issues in this scenario are not reductive; that is, she understands that no single pedagogical approach offers a panacea. She elucidates her understanding of culture and in a point of difference from her colleagues, focuses on the need for what Boler (2001) refers to as affirmative action pedagogy. She understands that the pedagogical exchange needs to recognise that culture provides these students with important background for their personal expression and contexts for their actions and options. From this viewpoint, Paige does not deny the refugee students their identity; she is not focused on dissolving difference. She is set on suggesting ways to respect difference, for example, being open to multiple modes of communication. She also suggested that teachers need to seek out pedagogical strategies that capitalise upon different students' strengths so they could also contribute to the project. Undertaking this affirmative action has the potential to motivate the marginalised students to be engaged.

Kaitlin's lengthy response also includes talk about recognition of difference and its relationship to justice. She was the only participant to directly address the politics of content choice. Her observations expose the potential harm of content choice that fails to positively and productively recognise difference.

Kaitlin: *I've started working in schools – it's something I've noticed in the last six months, especially in behavioural situations but also in activities, children are very concerned with whether something is fair or not. And of course the perceptions of fair are going to change....I think if you are fair in that you create tasks that are fair [and] challenging for all students, not just the middle students. You need to deal with behavioural issues in the most fair way that you can, and I think – and you know the fair rule, the process for dealing with behavioural things, having fair rules that all students can agree on and all students accept. But, I think being fair really applies to how you prepare your lessons and what kind of content you would have in there. It's only fair to challenge all students, provide something that's interesting and something that's relevant to all students. So it would be more hard in Miss Edwards' class, she's got children from different backgrounds, very different backgrounds, different degrees of English, but it's not fair to create tasks that they cannot engage in.*

Kaitlin states *the perceptions of fair are going to change*. Implicit within her statement is her understanding that presentations of recognitive and redistributive justice vary structurally for different groups. She subscribes to the view that all those affected should have an opportunity to express their interests and concerns as rules for behaviour are determined and as project tasks are decided upon. For justice to prevail, it is Kaitlin's belief that inclusion is more than a token measure of counting people in; her sense of inclusion allows the expression of all interested opinions and in this way is providing an opening for representational justice according to Fraser's framework. In emphasising that her ideals apply

to ‘all’ students, she resists the temptation to reduce students to group difference on the basis of some essential cultural or linguistic attribute. Kaitlin also recognises the potential for content choice to have a negative impact on some students. Young (1990) identifies ‘systematic institutional processes which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognised settings’ (p. 38) as a form of oppression. In this case, oppression is something other than an overt tyrannical coercive power; as Kaitlin understands, it also inheres in unquestioned choices and habits of literacy teaching and learning.

*(A) Role of Mother Tongue in Building Literacy Learning Outcomes*

Eight of the preservice teachers expressed a strong belief that in the situation outlined in the scenario, students should be permitted to use their Mother Tongue for intra-group discussion to build conceptual knowledge, and from there translate to English. Whilst Bryon and Carl offered support for Ms Edwards’ argument, they, along with six of their colleagues, were quite clear about the specificity of the situation and the targeted learning outcome. For example, Byron stated, *it’s not their English that’s on trial here. If it’s going to help them remember this particular water saving activity then they should, if they need to, talk to each other. I mean they may not have known a particular word in English for something that the other one was trying to explain.* Callum’s response was longer and more focused on the students’ performance as demonstrating linguistic competence vis-a-vis content competence.

Callum: *I don’t see why they need to be speaking English that much just to be able to learn English. I think they’ve probably been immersed in it enough with everyone else talking English around them that they’re going to be learning it, but why should they be having to try and understand everything in something that they don’t quite understand and trying to explain their own stuff in a way that everyone isn’t going to understand if they can’t do it. Maybe they know a whole lot about water conservation, but because they’ve got to say it in English, they can’t get that out. So the teacher might think that they don’t know what they’re talking about when really they do know what they’re talking about.*

In interview talk, Jordan approached this concept by drawing on his experiences as a Language Other Than English (LOTE) learner. He put a premium on strategies aligned with cognitive justice – that is the recognition and acceptance of his first language and a need to ‘think’ in that language - for its potential to redress aspects of redistributive justice – that is, provide him with the opportunity to access valued ways of using the dominant language of classroom Standard Australian English.

Jordan: *I know when I have done emerging courses in language, I definitely still need to speak my own language to figure out what I’m trying to say to someone else. I have to get the idea straight in my own head and then I can translate it. I think that’s a totally valid learning style.*

Jordan definitively positions as legitimate the value of students thinking in and speaking their ‘own’ language to ‘figure out’ what to say in the language valued in the classroom. In this way he is considering how aspects of cognitive justice can support aspects of redistributive justice.

## Discussion

This analysis reminds us that literacy teaching and learning is not a neutral activity. Neither is the implementation of processes that attempt to redress issues of social justice. In the current era, complex issues arise from the long-standing systemic prejudices, privileges and mis/understandings that become part of pedagogic practice, even when on the surface that practice is targeted at redressing issues of justice. None of the preservice teacher

participants subscribed to the prevalence and power of redistributive justice through standardised pedagogical practices for all. Despite the pervading public policy context of reforms aligned with forms of redistributive justice and potentially deficit constructions of diversity, these third year preservice teachers demonstrated through their talk and puzzling of solutions to the scenario, their beliefs that recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity positively affected equity priorities. Even though questions are often raised about the homogeneity of the standard teaching population in Australia and thus their understandings of diversity and difference amongst student populations, these preservice teachers were supportive of the importance of dealing with cultural and linguistic difference in positive ways within classrooms.

All 20 preservice teacher participants identified the role of the teacher in ameliorating the students' 'struggle for recognition'. Perhaps as a result of their limited experience in real classrooms though, few of the preservice teachers were able to provide a productive way forward. However two preservice teachers, Kaitlin and Paige, did discuss issues of inclusion, culturally responsive pedagogy and ways to provide students with a voice in decisions about the content and practice of classrooms. The considerations of these preservice teachers provide us with hope for the future of socially just education, even though we recognise the difficulties expressed by our research participants of working with difference in and through literacy lessons. We also note that there were limited understandings of the preservice teachers that representative justice need also be considered. We take forward into our own practice, from this analysis of our preservice colleagues' talk, the importance of providing spaces for thinking and learning about ways of productively responding to diversity within teacher education training programs. It is clear that it is not good enough to raise awareness of issues related to teaching for social justice. Instead it has become crucial that teacher educators take up the challenge of engaging with preservice teachers in ways that move them toward productive, practical practice of what socially-just education might and could look like.

### **Implications for Preservice Teacher Education**

This investigation demonstrates that teacher educators must hold as a goal of their teaching of teacher education students, instruction that provides their students with a clearer sense of what calling on productive and meaningful practices for all students entails. We thus conclude that teacher education courses must do more to promote a politics that attends to, rather than merely tolerates and accepts, difference. In current contexts of conservative approaches to teacher education this becomes more important, not less so. Attending to difference requires action not just talk, for example, establishing procedures for ensuring diverse voices are heard. A socially-just teacher needs to observe aspects of diversity and be equipped to offer pedagogical solutions to issues of power and privilege that give rise to institutionalised systems of inequity. Moreover, a socially-just teacher would encourage students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural and individual levels and to take up the impetus for social action in the service of social change. As teachers, we take on this call in our work in teacher education. Young (2010) advances:

*Aiming to promote social justice through public action requires more than framing debates in terms that appeal to justice. It requires an objective understanding of the society, a comprehensive account of its relations and structured processes, its material locations and environmental conditions, a detailed knowledge of events and conditions in different places and positions, and the ability to predict the likely consequences of actions and policies. (p. 117)*

Clearly this suggestion foregrounds other ways of doing and thinking about justice beyond the redistribution of resources. But in relation to cognitive justice it also goes

beyond the celebration of diversity, the use of mother tongue in the classroom or even the existence of democratic processes regarding class goals and procedures. Instead of relying solely on redistributive justice, the preservice teachers involved in this research, have demonstrated a developing capacity toward recognitive social justice also. They seem to be developing a vision for an educational environment that is conducive to engaged, critical and empowered thinking and action. It seems that these preservice teachers have as far as the rest of the educational community has to go in coming to any understanding of what it might mean to practice representational justice as part of a multi dimensional approach to socially just education. In our approach to teaching and learning, equity and social justice must be more than buzzwords. Instead the concepts must become part of the lived practice in the classroom (Woods, Dooley, Luke, & Exley 2014). This requires that we engage critically with redistribution, recognition and representation as concepts of social justice and equity. One way forward suggested by Hackman (2005) is 'an examination of systems of power and oppression combined with a prolonged emphasis on social change and student agency in and outside of the classroom' (p. 104). For these recognitive remedies to be effected, there still needs to be a redistribution of economic resources. Thus redistributive federal reforms of significant worth must still be put on the table. What is required, however, is attention to the recognitive, redistributive and representational dimensions of social justice, in ways that provide preservice teachers with tools for rethinking education and the institution of schooling and its systemic – often hidden – structures of inequality. This is because oppression, and its antithesis, justice, are consequences of the manner in which society is structured (distribution), of the fact that this structure is not questioned (recognition) and of the fact that many remain without speaking positions that enable them to have a true say in the practices of education (representation).

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